



8-2016

# Moral Margins: Ethics and Economics in American Northern Literature, 1837-1900

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## Recommended Citation

Stromski, John Adam, "Moral Margins: Ethics and Economics in American Northern Literature, 1837-1900." PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2016.

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**Moral Margins:**  
**Ethics and Economics in American Northern Literature, 1837-1900**

**A Dissertation Presented for the**  
**Doctor of Philosophy**  
**Degree**  
**The University of Tennessee, Knoxville**

**John Adam Stromski**

**August 2016**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have accumulated many debts throughout my life that have collectively cumulated in this moment. Some of my earliest memories are of my parents reading, yet for as much as the three of us have continued the habit, I believe there are only be a handful of books we share having read. Laurie Saulys, Patricia Melei, and Sean Clark were three teachers during my primary and secondary education whose interest and investment in my work continues to influence so much of my relationship to the field: how I read, write, and teach. During my undergraduate and graduate years, the support and guidance of Christopher Hanlon and Dawn Coleman have made me a better researcher and writer than I ever thought possible; under their mentorship the road was not always easy, but that vastly enriched the finish. I have also greatly benefited from conversations with Katy Chiles, Martin Griffin, and Tom Haddox, each of whom has had foundational influences upon the shape of this project. Kim Hunter-Perkins and Katie Burnett are two colleagues, friends, and Skype-buddies who have looked at and discussed countless drafts of this project; they have made my work and graduate school much easier and enjoyable. I cannot begin to imagine how different life would be without the presence of Hannah Ledford, who has been my staunchest supporter in every way. Just as my research focuses on the unconscious and invisible influences of institutions over people, so has Hannah influenced my life in countless ways; though I may not always be able to describe, pinpoint, or uncover those ways, I know they have all been for the better.

## ABSTRACT

“Moral Margins: Slavery and Capitalism in American Northern Literature, 1837-1900,” focuses on the intersections of slavery, capitalism, and literature, building on recent historical scholarship on the myriad ways slavery impacted the growth of American capitalism. Nowhere is this relationship more prominent than in the nineteenth century, when slavery experienced its highest levels of economic and political influence. Scholars of capitalism and American slavery have tended to focus on the South, the obvious locus of slavery, but little attention is paid to the North, where this relationship is more veiled. I argue that Northern literature shows the ethical complexities of slavery-based capitalism, affecting issues from the spread of industrialization to the rhetoric of wage labor. This is especially prominent within literature written by laborers, such as *The Lowell Offering*, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and *Life in the Iron Mills*, as well as texts written by advocates for Northern workers such as Rebecca Harding Davis, Martin Delany, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Through readings of abolitionist and labor literature, my project shows how slavery and capitalism mutually influenced the ways that all Americans, no matter how distant they believed themselves to be from slaveholding plantations, re-conceived notions of ethics and identity through their market interactions.

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## INTRODUCTION

In Lucy Larcom's *An Idyl of Work* (1875), a poetic memoir of her time spent working in the Lowell textile mills during the 1840s, a mill girl opines to her friend,

When I've thought,  
... what soil the cotton-plant  
We weave, is rooted in, what waters it,  
—The blood of souls in bondage, — I have felt  
That I was sinning against light, to stay  
And turn the accursed fibre into cloth  
For human wearing. . . . (Larcom 135-136)

Written after the Civil War, but taking place during the 1830s and 40s, "The blood of souls in bondage" holds a double meaning.<sup>1</sup> Beyond metonymically referencing the black race, Larcom also attends to the real, liquid form of blood, a substitute for water that grows and stains the cotton plant. Looking back from 1875, "blood" also invokes the carnage of the Civil War, a conflict that her factory labor in some ways contributed to, assisting the economic disparity that increased throughout the antebellum era and augmenting the spread of Southern slavery.

In one way, Larcom draws upon a distinction commonly used among white Northern laborers throughout the antebellum era between wage and slave labor, equating wage labor with industry and slave labor with the plantation. Additionally, she points to the defining characteristics of the North's and South's respective positioning within a nationally unified supply chain: the South provides an agricultural crop to the industrialized North, where it is turned into a commoditized good, and then sent out to market. But Larcom suggests that the most important aspect of this relationship is the ethics involved in that process, the moral logic behind Larcom's sense that she was "sinning against light" by laboring within this economic system. Ethical questions are further woven into the actions of Northern laborers:

To much that is distasteful we're compelled

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<sup>1</sup> Larcom labored in the Lowell mills from 1835-46. In her memoir, *A New England Girlhood* (1889), she claims to have been between the ages of 11 and 12 when she began, though Tomas Dublin, in *Women at Work*, places her at only 10 (Dublin 67).

By circumstances. For our daily bread,  
We, who must earn it, have to suffocate  
The cry of conscience, sometimes. (Larcom 135)

“Suffocate” is a loaded word here. Within the context of the Lowell mills of the 1830s and 40s, the term calls to mind the diseases that women who worked in the mills often developed by inhaling the cotton fibers that constantly circulated in the mills, a consequence of what contemporaneous critics described as poor ventilation.<sup>2</sup> The word also implies a type of violence inflicted against the self, allegorizing how Northern industry, through its increasing usage and demand for slave-grown cotton, indirectly contributed to the violence of the Civil War, when “with our dearest blood” (136) the debt to Southern slaves was repaid. Both of these meanings, however, are subordinate to “The cry of conscience,” the ethical concerns the mill girl is unable to voice because she must do what she can to provide for herself financially. As the speaker tells her friend, though she feels bad – as if she is committing a moral wrong – she is nevertheless compelled “to stay and turn the accursed fibre into cloth.” The mill girl asks:

. . . Am I not enslaved

In finishing what slavery has begun? (136)

Her friend likewise wonders the same thing, responding that “We all share the nation’s sin” (136).

Larcom’s poem articulates a variety of questions that circulated within Northern industrial sites and, more broadly, around the relationship between Northern wage and Southern slave labor. While Larcom leaves the question of whether or not the mill girl is similarly

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<sup>2</sup> Though she makes no direct correlation to her work at the mills, Larcom complained to Harriet Robinson near the end of her life that “The lungs and bronchial tubes are in wrong condition; I sometimes raise blood, and I have profuse local perspiration about the chest at night” (qtd. in Marchalonis 260). For more on contemporary opinions on the health of mill workers, see David Zonderman, *Aspirations and Anxieties*, 81-84. I also treat diseases associated with factory life more fully in chapter four.

enslaved unanswered, “Moral Margins” tries to answer a similar question: What was the relationship between Northern labor and Southern slavery during the nineteenth century?

The relationship between Northern labor and Southern slavery was not always as visible or causal as Larcom makes it out to be. As historians have increasingly demonstrated in recent years, slavery was instrumental to the formation and growth of American capitalism. During the early part of the nineteenth century, Northern and Southern economic interests were relatively similar, in part because slavery continued to exist in each section, but also because both sections were in the throes of what Charles Sellers famously described as a market revolution that “established capitalist hegemony over economy, politics, and culture” (Sellers 5).<sup>3</sup>

The economic sectional similitude that Sellers sees revolutionizing and expanding the Jacksonian market, however, was rent asunder by the Panic of 1837, the biggest financial collapse the United States had ever experienced. This economic crisis, as historian Walter Johnson notes in *River of Dark Dreams*, was a watershed moment for both the history of American capitalism and the heightening of sectional tensions. According to Johnson, the Panic of 1837 deeply affected how the Cotton South viewed its relationship to the national economy, prompting prominent economic interests in the South to try and “‘liberate’ themselves from dependence on the North” by emphasizing “the need for agricultural improvement and regional self-sufficiency” (W. Johnson, *River*, 285). After the Panic, leading economic thinkers in the South thus “emphasized regional independence and internal diversification over commercial interdependence and comparative advantage” (286).

“Moral Margins” takes Johnson’s claim seriously, building on it to show not only the economic fallout from the Panic of 1837, but also the cultural and ideological repercussions of

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<sup>3</sup> Slavery was officially abolished in the last Northern state in 1804, though many of these states only passed laws for gradual emancipation.

the economic shift. In the wake of the 1837 Panic, Southerners and Northerners alike reconsidered the ways their sectional economies were, or could be, different. For even if the economies remained dependent upon each other, the idea, possibility, and threat of an independent Southern economy prompted Northern literature to question what an independent Northern economy was or could be.

In arguing for a distinctly regional, Northern version of American capitalism, this project intervenes in recent historical studies of the relationship between American slavery and capitalism. Works such as Gavin Wright's *Slavery and American Economic Development* (2006), Walter Johnson's *River of Dark Dreams* (2013), Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton* (2013), and Edward Baptist's *The Half Has Never Been Told* (2014) discuss the influence of slavery upon the formation and growth of American capitalism, but focus largely on the South. This influence makes sense: the South, after all, is the obvious locus of slavery, where the connection between slavery and capitalism is most clearly and viscerally on display. In order to better understand "slave economies," Wright tells us, we must necessarily look to the slave states, a window into American capitalism more generally since they were: "as fully developed and in some ways more fully developed than their counterparts in the free-labor states" (Wright 12). Johnson locates his study of slavery and capitalism within the Mississippi Valley, whose namesake river leads to New Orleans, "the commercial emporium of the Midwest, the principal channel through which Southern cotton flowed to the global economy and foreign capital came into the United States, the largest slave market in North America, and the central artery of the continent's white overseers' flirtation with the perverse attractions of global racial domination" (Johnson 2). The rapid expansion of the cotton industry across the globe, but especially in Great Britain, depended upon, as Beckert details, "violence across the Atlantic," in the American

South, to meet its increasing demand (Beckert 110). And Edward Baptist, seeking to disrupt the lingering perception that “slavery in the United States was fundamentally in contradiction with the political and economic systems of the liberal republic, and that inevitably that contradiction would be resolved in favor of the free-labor North,” emphasizes the daily realities and lived experiences of slavery, realities most dramatic and on display in the Southern states (Baptist xviii). In each of these studies, slavery tends to override sectional differences when it comes to capitalism, as the various industries and markets across the states were dependent upon each other, equally reliant upon the system of slavery. Studies of slavery and capitalism too often tend to begin on the Southern plantation and end in the global economy.

In one regard, this recent scholarship by historians reveals the ways that the Northern and Southern economies were not that different; slavery affected the rapid development of industrialization in the North just as much as it did increasing levels of cotton production in the South. Indeed, historians are quick to point out that slavery fueled the development of industrialization in the North. In the 1998 edited collection, *The Meaning of Slavery in the North*, for example, Ronald Bailey explains how “it was upon the Charles River at Waltham” that the Industrial Revolution took hold, serving to “fasten even more tightly the dying and anachronistic institution of U.S. slavery to the chariot of fast-paced national progress for the next fifty years” (Bailey 3). Many of these factories and the textiles they produced, Myron Stachiw argues, “share[d] the ‘guilt’ of using slave-grown cotton and thus encourage[d] the slave system” (Stachiw 35).

A somewhat similar approach is followed by literary scholars when it comes to Southern and American literature. Conferences and journal special issues for “The Global South” have become a recent theme, while the North is positioned only as a middle-man within a commercial

system that begins in New Orleans and ends in England, thereby only a small link in the supply chain the Confederacy sought to monopolize, or as synonymous with a larger American/Unionized culture and economy to which both the North and South contributed. For example, Coleman Hutchison's *Apples and Ashes: Literature, Nationalism, and the Confederate States of America* argues for the need to view the Confederacy as, if only for a brief moment, a sovereign nation, whose founders already saw themselves as participants on a global stage. Expounding upon this global awareness, Hutchison says, allows "us to tell the story of this conflict [the Civil War] in less exceptionalist, more cosmopolitan terms" (Hutchison 12-13). But what the "exceptionalist" view he invokes is remains hard to pin down to one specific region, relegated to an ambiguous "American" exceptionalism which the North is assumed to participate in, and then becomes mapped onto the South during its Confederate years. Jennifer Rae Greeson, in *Our South*, usefully reminds us then that "the South" is, "first and foremost, an ideological concept rather than a place" (Greeson 10). However, as Greeson continues, she explains that this ideological construct is one that "Americans have leaned on . . . for national self-definition since the founding, and we continue to lean on it today. The ideological juxtaposition of the United States to its South arose out of the material process of nationalization itself" (10). Since the nation's inception then, but especially in the nineteenth century, the South is regularly imagined as a counterpoint to American identity, and it remains hard to remember, as Martin Griffin does in *Ashes of the Mind*, that "there was such a thing as a Northern writer at a time when that distinction meant something" (Griffin 7). Too often, "American literature" has been read as synonymous with Northern literature, just as Hutchison positions southern literary nationalism against "*northern/American literature*" (Hutchison 11).



My point is perhaps better illustrated by looking at a diary entry of George Templeton Strong. On December 2, 1860, Strong wrote: “I fear Northerner and Southerner are aliens, not merely in social and political arrangements, but in mental and moral constitution” (Strong 170). Note that Strong does not say that “Americans” and “Southerners” are different. Clearly, Strong had an idea of what it meant to have a Northern and Southern set of moral codes, codes that were, in this moment, diametrically opposed to each other and which served as definitional standards for people from both regions. Just as we view the nineteenth-century South as having a distinct and separate identity and culture, so, too, did the North have a regional identity largely forgotten in literary studies. Indeed, there is no anthology on Northern Literature to compete with the various versions available for Southern literature.<sup>4</sup>

Like “the South,” “the North” was also an ideological construct, and this project takes up the ways that ideology was shaped by Northern authors throughout the nineteenth century. After the Panic of 1837 Northerners began to question what it was that made their economy unique. Literary and artistic representations of Northern labor worked to show that Northern capitalism was different not only because it lacked the institution of slavery, but also because it adhered to a different set of ethical standards. What these ethical standards were and how they shaped Northern capitalism looked different as the nineteenth century wore on, and as sectional tensions held different levels of influence over the shape of the country. However, one theme remained constant in these literary representations of labor: Northern wage laborers were different from Southern slave laborers.

Beginning during the depression experienced after the Panic of 1837, “Moral Margins” investigates how Northern literature tried to imagine and define the ethical and cultural

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<sup>4</sup> To name just a few, *The Literature of the American South: A Norton Anthology* (1997); *The South in Perspective: An Anthology of Southern Literature* (2000); and *Confederate Literature* (2009); not to mention the wide variety of collections of poetry, women’s writing, and a variety of specialized focuses.

differences between Northern and Southern capitalism. Taken together, these chapters explore the ways that all Americans, no matter how distant they believed themselves to be from slave-holding plantations, were nevertheless daily affected by slavery through their economic activities. By applying such a regional approach to the North, “Moral Margins” highlights the more subtle, often veiled ways that slavery influenced the Northern market. Accounts of Northern wage labor provided the most dramatic comparisons and most fertile grounds for exploration of the connection between Northern, white, wage labor, and Southern, black, slave labor, or, between Northern and Southern capitalism, by exploring the lives, identities, and labors of the peoples who sustained both systems. Northern literature of the nineteenth-century, I argue, continually crafted the relationships amongst and between workers and employers, or between labor and capital, in ways meant to minimize the presence and influence of slavery, and in so doing, rationalize their own industrializing economy as a more ethical means of labor.

Economic events like the Panic of 1837 have only recently been discussed seriously in relation to literature, most notably through the literary analysis of what has come to be described as panic fiction. Panic fiction, argues Mary Templin in *Panic Fiction*, provided an arena wherein authors, particularly women, could try to “restore moral considerations to the economy” (Templin 11). Through the employment of sentiment to advocate for reform in economic behavior, María Carla Sánchez discusses in *Reforming the World*, panic fiction paralleled the intentions of broader reform movements such as the temperance and abolitionist movements. As Templin sums up this body of fiction and scholarship, “panic produced anxiety about social changes and disrupted certain kinds of identity, particularly that of gender and class” (11). Panics proved an especially attractive topic to literary authors, David Zimmerman explains in *Panic!*, because of their ability to expose “cultural and economic dynamics that were invisible under

normal conditions” (Zimmerman 2). One of these dynamics that the Panic of 1837 dramatically exposed, I argue, was the influence of slavery upon economic interactions far removed from the plantation. Indeed, when confronted with the anxieties and invisible dynamics that were brought to the forefront of public discussion after the Panic, many Northern laborers compared their situation to that of the Southern slaves, at times finding relief, at other times fear. Although the fiction I take up in my study would not necessarily be described as panic fiction, it nevertheless shares a similar imperative to reinsert ethical considerations back into interactions with the marketplace.

In thinking about how the Panic of 1837 changed the ways Americans imagined their relationship to the marketplace, it is important to consider “Northern” as an adjective in addition to its noun form, since after the Panic Northern literature encouraged workers to interact with the market in a more “Northern” way. Eric Foner argues in *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, that in the 1840s and 1850s “northerners came to view slavery as the antithesis of the good society, as well as a threat to their own fundamental values and interests” (E. Foner, *Free*, 9). What qualities defined their Northern, “good society” were constantly in flux throughout the nineteenth century, and, by tracing the development of Northern nationalism, historian Susan-Mary Grant argues that “northerners, no less than southerners, were engaged in a quest for self-definition that ultimately led to the development of an ideology predicated not on the American nation but on a northern one” (Grant 4). Thus, in its most capacious sense, “Northern” simply meant “non-slaveholding.” Indeed, I use the term for similar reasons as does Grant, who clarifies her own work by explaining that “the term ‘the North’ is used in the sense in which it was understood by those who employed it at the time—to refer to a particular sectional awareness defined and sustained by its opposition to ‘the South’” (Grant 11). The literature I interrogate throughout “Moral

Margins” explores the ways that such a rudimentary yet important distinction could be maintained economically, culturally, and aesthetically.

By defining the “North” primarily as “non-slaveholding,” I do not mean to recreate the bifurcation of nineteenth-century American sectionalism, but rather to draw attention to the fact that although a “Northern” identity was a distinctive characterization people could rely upon, it was just as much a construction as “Southern” was. Indeed, “non-slaveholding” was not a characteristic inherent to the North, but a deliberate construction on the part of the North in light of the mounting influence of the South and slavery over the politics, economics, and future of the Union. It was a definition that Northern literature sought to develop, maintain, explore and refine, in a variety of ways I take up in each of my chapters.

Northern literature often used representations of labor as the grounds upon which to work towards the definition of a specifically regional ideal. Representations of labor not only allowed stark differences to be drawn between wage and slave labor, but also to further that distinction by applying a set of Northern ethics. Heavily influenced by abolitionism, but also by the ideology of free labor, Northern literature routinely questioned how wage labor and slavery affected both the individual and collective conscience of the Northern workforce. However, as the opening example from Larcom points out, though her work with slave-grown cotton routinely “suffocate[d] The cry of conscience,” the character nevertheless continued to labor. Capitalism, as Larcom’s text shows, always has a way of clouding moral judgment and moral responsibility. The institution of slavery, John Ashworth notes in his history of capitalism, is no exception: “We ought perhaps to remind ourselves . . . that, while Christianity has, for two millennia, emphasized the importance of the soul and of the conscience, for all but a small portion of that time, the buying and selling of men has not been thought to be at all immoral”

(Ashworth 185). It is only at “the very moment,” Ashworth continues, “when more commodities than ever before – and especially the crucial commodity of labor power – were being bought and sold, the abolitionists discovered that it was impious in the extreme to sell human beings” (185). Capitalism can both obscure moral issues and bring them to the forefront, and Northern literature explored what it meant to labor in an increasingly slavery-dependent economy. However, Northern literature that took up the issue of labor was less concerned with solving the problems associated with the system of slavery-based capitalism and more so with maintaining the regional and ethical distinctions between slave and wage labor. As shown in each of my chapters, the literature I analyze advocates for better understanding, or sometimes mere recognition, of the ethical complexities of Northern labor.

By arguing for “Northern” as a distinctly regional economic system, “Moral Margins” similarly argues for a distinctly regional subset of American literature, using the category of “Northern literature” throughout. Although my dissertation may privilege texts from the New England area, I read them as participating in a larger sectional dialogue. New England was the home to the nineteenth-century North’s literary elite, their printing presses, their centers of trade and industry. Therefore, as Grant points out, New England can be “considered peculiarly northern during the antebellum era, since it ‘best reflected’ the social and economic trends that separated North and South in the years before the Civil War” (Grant 10). Certainly the North has a variety of regional identities, but the characteristic of Northern as non-slavery was the one that would be routinely fought for as sectional crises mounted, evidenced by the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The “North” as a concept was thus used to

conceptually link a variety of writers from different regions who believed that what connected their economy was its ethical, cultural, and geographic opposition to slavery.<sup>5</sup>

The most prominent linkage between the authors and texts I analyze is their adherence to the ideals of free labor, the ideology that became the political backbone to the Republican party and which was seen as the more ethical and productive alternative to the other system of American labor: slavery. While study of free labor and the class distinctions it gave rise to is a frequent topic for historians, it occupies a somewhat marginal place in literary studies of the antebellum era. Part of the reason for this is what literary scholar Amy Schrager Lang describes, in *The Syntax of Class*, as the lack of a “vocabulary, as it were, in which to express the experience of class—its complacencies as well as its injuries and its struggles” (Lang 6). Thus, in much of what can be described as working-class or labor literature, one often sees a lack of class consciousness, since as Nicholas Coles and Janet Zandy point out, “‘Working-class’ is—of necessity and circumstance—not a single discreet identity, but an uneasy and unstable amalgam of multiple identities” (Coles and Zandy xx). Laura Hapke argues in *Labor’s Text* that within literature the fluidity of these identities is because these authors “engage in narratives or counternarratives of classlessness. Despite this nation’s history of sharp labor-capital antagonisms, it remains Americans’ ideology of ‘exceptionalism’ that class boundaries seem fluid in a country of such unlimited economic possibility” (Hapke 5). Within the labor texts of the nineteenth century, there was only one class identity that appeared to remain fixed, that of the slave.

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<sup>5</sup> Literary studies that employ a similar categorization of Northern literature are few, but there are some. See Anne R. Rowe, *The Enchanted Country: Northern Writers in the South, 1865-1910*, (1978); Lyde Cullen Sizer, *The Political Work of Northern Women Writers and the Civil War, 1850-1872*, (2000); Martin Griffin, *Ashes of the Mind: War and Memory in Northern Literature, 1865-1900* (2009).

A more pressing issue than working towards class consciousness, for many Northern laborers, was how the presence of slavery would affect their socioeconomic mobility, their potential to partake in the fantasy of “unlimited economic possibility” if they closely adhered to the tenets of free labor. “Moral Margins” argues that in working through the relationship between wage and slave labor, Northern authors inserted a system of ethics into the imagined relationships between labor and capital. Repeatedly in nineteenth-century Northern literature, representations of labor were used to question and figure out the ethical responsibilities of people to each other and to the market, and how these responsibilities were being changed and challenged by the increasing influence slavery held over market relations, influencing the daily lives of Americans geographically and culturally distant from Southern plantations. In working through these new and ever-changing relationships in a slavery-based marketplace, religious institutions and authorities were able to offer little moral guidance. Ethics, however, were more nimble and urgent, better able to adapt to the changing marketplace. Traditionally, the interrelations between ethics and capitalism are intentionally kept separate by economists. However, as John Douglas Bishop notes in *Ethics and Capitalism*, the two can intersect in important ways. Bishop argues that “Ethics is concerned with individual behaviour as well as social structures, so besides assessing capitalism and the institutions within capitalism, we should also ask how individuals who find themselves living within actual capitalist systems ought to behave” (Bishop 35).<sup>6</sup> Literature can play an equally valuable role in these studies. Though “Moral Margins” is not an economic study, each of the authors I look at asked the same

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<sup>6</sup> A number of economists have made a similar call, though literature is routinely left out of their interdisciplinary approaches. See, for example, Amitai Etzioni, *The Moral Dimension: Toward a New Economics* (1988); Mark A. Lutz, *Economics for the Common Good* (1999); and Jane Clary, Wilfred Dolfsma, and Deborah M. Figart’s collection, *Ethics and the Market: Insights from Social Economics* (2006).

questions that Bishop says need to be further studied, questioning the individual responsibility of laborers to a market increasingly dependent upon and influenced by slavery.

In many ways, *Moral Margins* tracks the rise and fall of American idealism towards the capitalist system, tracing the ways that Northerners believed they had the potential to enact positive changes over the slavery-based market and how those beliefs were gradually diminished as slavery continued to exert an increasing role over the growth of American capitalism. After the Panic of 1837, there was an insurgence of idealist aspirations regarding the shape and direction of capitalism in the Northern states, as evidenced through a proliferation of utopian and reform minded communities. In chapter one, I explore how Northern reform communities such as Fruitlands and the Northampton Association explored more ethical means of production and profit to highlight the differences between Northern and Southern capitalism and in an attempt to assert economic independence from slavery. The silk movement offers a particularly good window through which to view both the cultural fallout from the Panic of 1837 and the shift in thinking about the distinctions between regional markets. For Northern periodicals like *The Liberator* and *The Colored American*, silk offered a means of ending the North's dependency on Southern cotton, thereby hastening the abolition of slavery.

But the silk movement failed to replace cotton, in small part because of the explosion of Northern textile manufacturing during the 1840s, which made Northern industry increasingly dependent upon Southern cotton. And while the textile industry was dramatically altering the landscapes of places like Lowell, Nashua, and Manchester, it was also altering the lives of countless women across the rural North, whose labor was repeatedly compared to plantation slavery. In chapter two, I use texts like *The Lowell Offering* and *Fall River* to show how literary and artistic depictions of life in the textile factories of Northern cities used the picturesque to



show the differences between the factory and the plantation, two labor systems that at times bore an uncanny resemblance in the minds of Northern critics over industrialization. Whereas Southern writers and artists used the picturesque – a mode of landscape painting and theory popular throughout the antebellum era – to highlight the financial solvency and superiority of the plantation system, Northerners used it to emphasize the ethical differences between wage and slave labor, positing Northern wage labor as a means to reinvigorate republican virtue amongst the laboring classes.

No matter how much free labor ideology extolled itself as being more ethical than slave labor, it was not a system universally applicable to all types of Northern labor or for all Northern laborers. Especially for free black laborers in the North, the tenets of free labor were not so readily accessible. In chapter three I look at slave narratives and the labor writings of Northerners like Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany to highlight the threatening influence of Southern capitalism upon identity politics in the Northern workplace. Frederick Douglass's influential 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* can create the assumption among readers and scholars that upon entering the antebellum North black laborers were automatically incorporated into the system of free labor, but I highlight the ways that the commoditized status of black labor under Southern capitalism continued to negatively affect concepts of labor, freedom, and civic participation for black American Northerners.

Lastly, I discuss the continued influence of slavery over Northern labor throughout the postbellum era. After the Emancipation Proclamation, the legal recognition of slavery as a category of labor was suddenly removed, and a preponderance of new laboring bodies were suddenly added to the wage labor force. Among these bodies were disabled veterans returning from the war, recently freed slaves, and increasing generations of immigrants. Within Northern

labor fiction written by Rebecca Harding Davis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and W.H. Little, I discuss how figures of disability, bodies viewed as “corrupted” by capital, acted as proxies to address issues of race. Labor reformers wondered if reformist strategies employed during the fight for abolition could be redirected towards labor problems, but each of the authors I discuss in this chapter point out the limitations of such strategies when they fail to address slavery’s continuing influence over labor relations. In a brief coda, I discuss Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, a text that I argue finally removes any distinction between Northern and American capitalism

“Moral Margins” thus shows how American slavery-based capitalism influenced the ways that all Americans, no matter how distant they believed themselves to be from slaveholding plantations, re-conceived notions of ethics and identity through their market interactions. The interweaving of ethics into a distinctly Northern identity manifests itself in literature in its progressive depiction of labor over the course of the nineteenth century, trying to use representations of labor as a means to ethically respond and account for the increasing influence of slavery over sectional tensions and capitalism, forces that exerted daily influence over their lives. As the century wore on and slavery continued to increase its influence over the capitalist economy, Northern literature continually explored the extent to which Northern labor was affected by and contributory to the slave system that they routinely measured themselves against, understood themselves as separate from, and prided themselves as apart from.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **THE ELYSIAN MARKET: NORTHERN CAPITALISM AND THE MORAL RHETORIC OF SILK**

When the United States House of Representatives proposed a formal Resolution in 1825 to “inquire whether the cultivation of the mulberry tree, and the breeding of silk worms, for the purpose of producing silk, be a subject worthy of Legislative attention” (Rush 9), it did so in hopes of establishing within the United States production of a commodity that had hereto been provided almost entirely by foreign suppliers. The value of silk imports, from 1821 to 1825, was estimated at \$35,156,494, a lucrative investment opportunity that prompted Congress’s Resolution.<sup>7</sup> For several years, Congress debated whether or not legislative action should be taken to encourage the cultivation of silk, though a bill was never passed. Throughout the 1830s and into the early 1840s though, state governments and many Americans, especially in the North, saw in silk the prospect for more than just financial gain. Advocates of Northern sericulture saw a potential way to minimize complicity with both the slavery-driven cotton industry and Southern commerce.

As historians point out, silk never became as lucrative a market as Congress had hoped; it registers as only a blip, a speculative bubble, in the history of Northern agriculture and investment.<sup>8</sup> The primary contribution to the bursting of this bubble, as Paul Gates and Marjorie Senechal note, was that silk advocates enflamed the “multicaulis mania” by driving up the prices of trees they themselves were selling, promoting the profitability of silk only to increase their own sales. During the height of “the silkworm craze,” speculation for the *morus multicaulis*, a newly discovered genus of mulberry tree that provided the leaves silkworms feed upon,

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<sup>7</sup> The 1825 Resolution compared silk to the diminishing value of American exports, particularly grains, which had in 1817 totaled “\$20,374,000,” in 1825 brought in only “\$5,417,997,” a decrease of 376 percent (Rush 5).

<sup>8</sup> As Erika May Olbricht has shown, the possibility of silk revolutionizing the economy was a key point that advocates of the trade, dating back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, often made. Historians of silk look at antebellum silk production as a wild and speculative fervor that had little positive benefits for investors, leading scholars to variously call it the “multicaulis fever” and “the silkworm craze” (Lilly 8; Gates 303). For more on earlier forms of the Western silk industry, see Olbricht, “Made without Hands: The Representation of Labor in Early Modern Silkworm and Beekeeping Manuals.”

drastically increased tree prices, and when a blight in the early 1840s destroyed most of the *morus* trees, economic interest in silk largely came to an end.<sup>9</sup> However, as Senechal notes, “The sericulture dream did not burst with the bubble” (Senechal 30). The idealism surrounding silk that captivated its promoters affected a broader reconsideration of the ethics of market participation. Silk’s contribution to the Northern market was not primarily economic; rather, its core contribution, I argue, was its influence upon how people began to conceptualize Northern capitalism. The cultural work of the silk movement seemed to promise economic and ethical independence from cotton and a means of supporting abolitionism.

The dual influences of ethics and economics on Northern interest in silk can be seen in the Massachusetts State House of Representatives in 1844, when a Mr. Wright, representing Concord, described how silk presented an opportunity to relinquish the state’s reliance upon slave-grown cotton: “Our cotton manufacturers are dependant [sic] on the south for their raw materials; silk would be our own, and states like individuals, cannot be too careful to secure within themselves, means for their prosperity and greatness” (“Silk [1]” 1). Tying the growth of silk to the pursuit of “prosperity and greatness,” Wright views silk as economically liberating. As discussed elsewhere in the North, such as in the abolitionist periodical *The Liberator*, economic liberation was an ethical response to slavery. Surveying the prospect of Southern sericulture overtaking silk in the North, the *Liberator* made clear that the moral capital generated by such business would far outweigh any diminished monetary profits in the North, telling the South to “Speed it on” (“Silk Culture at the South” 120). Reprinted in *The Liberator* from the like-minded *The Emancipator*, the editorial argued that the growth of silk in the South would do more to abolish slavery than other forms of Northern influence.

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<sup>9</sup> Specific dates for the collapse vary, though a consensus lies amongst scholars that the burst was in the early 1840s.

“It is the raw material,” Emerson writes in “The American Scholar,” “out of which the intellect moulds her splendid products. A strange process too, this, by which experience is converted into thought, as a mulberry leaf is converted into satin. The manufacture goes forward at all hours” (Emerson, “American,” 60). The conversion which Emerson’s sericulture metaphor relies upon moves abstract elements into an idealized and finalized state – experience into thought into the “splendid products” of the intellect, and the mulberry leaf into satin, a manufactured product from silk. Sericulture appeals to Emerson here because it is a process that experiences increased production based on further interaction with nature; one has only to assist nature’s natural course, providing the mulberry leaf to the silk worm, in order to ensure a manufacturing process that “goes forward at all hours.” Similar to the scholar’s intellect, the body itself (of the scholar and of the silk worm) exists as a means to assist nature’s course. A similar view of silk was held by many Northern advocates of the trade, that it held the possibility of transforming Northern sentiments into a fully realized – and profitable – state; indeed, discussions of the benefits of sericulture almost always rely upon a sense of futurity to make their case, a vision which often could be described as utopian. As Emerson described it in “The Young American,” it is through engaging with the market that democracy can best be advanced, as “The historian will see that trade was the principle of Liberty; that trade planted America and destroyed Feudalism; that it makes peace and keeps peace, and it will abolish slavery” (Emerson, “Young,” 221). For various advocates of sericulture, this trade was distinctively Northern.

The rhetoric employed in periodical debates over the merits of sericulture reveals that the silk debate functioned as a microcosm of larger sectional debates over slavery, capitalism, and ethics. At the intersection of Northern agrarianism and idealism, the Northern silk movement

sought to counteract the South's attempt at economic independence post-1837 by positing a more ethical, antislavery economy.

In this chapter, I discuss how advocates for the silk industry during the 1830s and 1840s, as well as Northern reform communities such as Fruitlands and the Northampton Association, used silk to conceptualize an independent Northern market wherein the value of labor and goods would be subject to ethical standards. Together, these groups represent a desire to hold the marketplace ethically responsible to labor, demonstrating a belief that slavery could be effectively ended through full reliance upon, or usage of, the market mechanism. I locate this desire as evidenced by the Congressional (both state and federal) attempts to foster agricultural independence in the North through the growth of silk, a crop that was imagined simultaneously to liberate the Northern economy from its economic dependence on the South and to purify it of its relation to slave labor. As various Northern thinkers held, silk provided one of the best means of doing that. For the antebellum North, silk participated in an attempt to conceive a more ethical economy, one that would be most profitably suited to those who shared the "character" of the Northern laborer. Conceptually, between the years 1832 and 1844 silk became a medium through which to express sectional anxieties over the national interdependencies within cotton's global supply chain. For the North, silk cultivation represented the possibility of an agrarian economy independent of Southern slave-cotton; for the South, it represented a means of perpetuating and profiting from slave-labor, and the possibility of severing economic ties with the North.

Acknowledging the role of sericulture in Northern commerce and culture amends the current debate on the role of slavery in the development of American capitalism by showing the importance of slavery – and resistance to slavery – to the development of Northern capitalism. Scholarship by Gavin Wright, Walter Johnson, Edward Baptist, Sven Beckert, and others has

demonstrated how significant slavery was to the growth of American capitalism, but their focus has tended to be on the Southern states. As Walter Johnson argues, the Panic of 1837 deeply affected the ways that the Cotton South viewed its relationship to the national economy, prompting Southern planters to try and “‘liberate’ themselves from dependence on the North” (W. Johnson, *River*, 285). Rhetoric surrounding silk shows the North attempting to do the same. The silk debate reveals how the development of capitalism became divided along sectional lines, shifting our consideration away from how slavery developed with respect to American capitalism, but with respect to American *capitalisms*, distinct profit-seeking regional and cultural formations. The rhetoric of antebellum silk, I argue, shows that capitalism was neither a monolithic force nor a value-neutral system during the nineteenth century.

### ***The Character of New England***

The best way to encourage abolitionism while profiting from silk was, as an editorial in the *Journal of the American Silk Society and Rural Economist* (JASSRE) pointed out, to unify the moral qualities of the Northerner with sericultural labor, or the cultivation of silk. “The Spread of the Culture of Silk,” an 1839 editorial, specifically addresses the sectional labor differences regarding silk cultivation between the North and the South, positing that the way to reconcile the differences lay in the *character* of New England laborers:

Were we called on to designate the portion of the United States where the business of growing silk may be most profitably pursued, in association with, or in substitution of other productions, we should probably include that portion of the slave-holding cotton region . . . We say most probably these, because it would only be to transfer the labor which is there, from non-paying cotton growing to silk culture. The labour which is adapted to one is precisely adapted to the other, needing, however, nicer attention and management. Were it possible for the planters . . . to unite with natural advantages and slave labour the *exact habits* of



the New England man, they would in silk making, beat the world. (“The Spread” 87-88)

Silk promises financial prosperity to the South only if the region can change how they treat their laborers, to be more like the “New England man.” Such changes would not only profit the South monetarily, as it would monopolize the world market – so the logic ran – but also would enable the South to hold another staple crop over the North. What differed between Northern and Southern sericulture were not the steps necessary to cultivate silk, but the “*exact habits*” of the laborers. These “habits” could be found, as Emerson claims in his 1858 address “Farming,” within the farmer: “If it be true,” Emerson writes, that “slaves are driven out of a slave State as fast as it is surrounded by free States, then the true abolitionist is the farmer, who, heedless of laws and constitutions, stands all day in the field, investing his labor in the land, and making a product with which no forced labor can compete” (Emerson, “Farming,” 87).<sup>10</sup> Within the North, cultivation of silk furthered the abolitionist cause not only by decreasing the demand for Southern cotton, but by spreading the habits of the Northern abolitionist.

While interest in silk cultivation did not take off until near the end of the 1830s (after cotton had emerged as a major export and after the establishment of Northern textile mills in the 1820s), an early fable from Lydia Maria Child shows the ways that silk’s association with sectional politics was cultivated in times of national economic turmoil. In her “Fable of the Caterpillar and Silk-Worm” (1832), Child uses three different silk producing insects to personify

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<sup>10</sup> My reading of “Farming” builds on Stephanie Sarver’s in *Uneven Land*, where she claims that “‘Farming’ is Emerson’s attempt to apply his philosophy of nature to communal activities implicated in a social and economic complex” (Sarver 17), showing the adaptability of farming in its New England context to a certain ethical philosophy.

the idea espoused in “The Spread,” that the profits of silk are directly proportional to the character of the laborer.<sup>11</sup>

Though all three of the insects (Spider, Caterpillar, and Silk-Worm) produce silk, the Silk-Worm is clearly the newest participant in this manufactory, Spider inquiring of Caterpillar “What sort of a weaver is your neighbor, the Silk-Worm?” (Child, “Spider,” 181). While Caterpillar and Spider extol their silk, they critique their competitor, Silk-Worm, for her lack of production. Spider and Caterpillar’s critique is reminiscent of the 1828 Tariff of Abominations which protected Northern industry at the cost of the more productive South. Caterpillar and Spider make clear in the first paragraph that they can create a vastly larger amount of raw material than Silk-Worm can: Caterpillar “can weave a web sixty times as quick” and Spider daily recreates a web unequaled by Silk-Worm (181). Both of these creatures feel as if their raw materials are not valued or rewarded as properly as they should, personifying the Southern sentiment that led to the 1832 Nullification Crisis, wherein South Carolina threatened to secede after the passage of an economic tariff thought to unfairly favor the North. Indeed, Caterpillar and Spider are united in their critique of the less productive Silk-Worm.

But as the “gentleman” explains, critiques based upon the speed, production, or quantity of the raw material are missing the point. The gentleman therefore rebukes Caterpillar and Spider on the grounds of the quality of the silk produced, reflective of the quality of labor used. A similar critique would be further expanded by Child the following year, in *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), wherein she claims that freedom brings with it increased investment by the worker in the quality of the labor, so that “The slave does not care how slowly or carelessly he works; it is the free man’s interest to do his business well and quickly. The slave is indifferent how many tools he spoils; the free man has a motive to be

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<sup>11</sup> The fable is reproduced in its entirety in Appendix 1.

careful” (Child, *Appeal*, 72-73). Indeed, the gentleman’s critiques are representative of the anti-slavery stance Child developed throughout her life.

Caterpillar “boast[s] of [her] *rapid* performances” (Child, “Spider,” 182), but these performances “contain the eggs that will hereafter develop themselves, and destroy blossom and fruit” (182), alluding to the fears of slave insurrection that were sweeping the South in the wake of Nat Turner’s 1831 Rebellion, and speaking to what Child stated in *An Appeal* was her “conviction that slavery causes insurrections, while emancipation prevents them” (Child, *Appeal*, 80). Slave labor may mean more “*rapid*” production, but it elicits eventual violence.<sup>12</sup> Spider’s product, on the other hand, beautiful though it may be, is “broken by a dew-drop, as some pretty poetry is marred by the weight of a single idea” (182); the single idea, here, being that slavery is wrong. It does not matter how beautiful the product is, or how much slavery apologists defend the quality of the cotton they grow, in the end it is always weighed down by the moral truth that it is wrong.

The gentleman in turn praises the product of Silk-Worm, who “Like genius expiring in the intensity of its own fires, she clothes the world in the beauty she dies in creating” (Child, “Spider,” 182). The unknown “neighbor” to Caterpillar and Spider, Silk-Worm represents the union of free Northern labor and abolitionism. Both of these ideas may require further labor to create its products, they may not even live to see it, as the silkworm expires “in the intensity of its own fires,” but the end result “clothes the world in beauty,” beauty the Caterpillar and Spider are unable to sustain in the long term. The utopian close of Child’s fable, a world “clothe[d] . . . in beauty,” is prescient of the free labor rhetoric that would be used to promote silk cultivation,

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<sup>12</sup> At the time, cultivating silk was a very lengthy process, primarily relying upon the white and red mulberry, trees that required several years to cultivate.

and the ways silk became an object of fascination to utopian communities like the Northampton Association and Fruitlands.

### ***The Northampton Association and the Profits of Utopia***

When Sojourner Truth first arrived at the Northampton Association in 1843, “She did not fall in love at first sight ... for she arrived there at a time when appearances did not correspond with the ideas of associationists, as they had been spread out in their writings; for their phalanx was a factory, and they were wanting in means to carry out their ideas of beauty and elegance” (Truth 657) (fig.1.1). Indeed, the factory of the Northampton Association was a stark contrast to the pastoral images of other utopian communities. What eventually won Truth over and convinced her to stay was not only the Association’s radical stance on racial equality, but also that when “she saw that accomplished, literary and refined persons were living in that plain and simple manner, and submitting to the labors and privations incident to such an infant institution, she said, ‘Well, if these can live here, *I can*’” (Truth 657).<sup>13</sup> Whereas Brook Farm and Fruitlands had yearned to unite intellectual and manual labor, through the medium of agrarian labor, the Northampton Association had found a way to unify the two through the cultivation and manufacture of silk. Such devotion to sericulture, the Northampton Association found, could not only provide a forum for abolitionism, but could also be financially profitable. In sericulture, the Northampton Association had found a way to sustain their idealism while ethically participating in the marketplace.

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<sup>13</sup> One of the bylaws of the Northampton’s Constitution stated that “The rights of all are equal without distinction of sex, color, or condition, sect or religion” (Sheffield 76). As historian of the Association Christopher Clark notes, Northampton was “one of the few places anywhere in the United States” to adopt such a view during this period (Clark, *Communitarian*, 7).

Apart from what the founders of the Northampton Association perceived to be the profitability of silk, the crop held a particular appeal to the more utopian inclinations of the community. For the Northampton Association and other utopian communities, the simultaneous cultivation of a crop and the intellect provided the backbone for self-sustenance, and cultivating silk was touted as an especially easy way to do this, available to all. Indeed, silk was especially amenable to the Association's labor reform aspirations, as Senechal notes that "From 1832 to 1846 silk was the object of utopian visions, first the industrial aspirations of a charismatic and unreliable businessman, Samuel Whitmarsh, then the industrial egalitarianism of a utopian community led by the idealistic and rigidly reliable Samuel Lapham Hill" (Senechal 5); what interested Whitmarsh and Hill was the commonly discussed belief that "sericulture is a lifeline for the poor" (27), which could be used to establish more egalitarian labor systems.<sup>14</sup> This aspect of the Association was perhaps its closest tie to Associationism, using the factory as the phalanx – as Truth had said – wherein a large number of community members lived and worked. The devotion to silk is what truly distinguished this Association from other utopian communities though, as "To abolitionists, silk had a further virtue. Though not a substitute for textiles made from slave-grown cotton, it was a 'free' product, made without reliance on slavery. . . . The most optimistic projectors of the silk industry could envisage its future role in a Northern industrial economy freed from dependence on the products of slavery" (143). Whereas other utopian communities like Fruitlands conscientiously abstained from the use of cotton due to its relation to slave labor, Northampton profited from that abstention.

The Northampton Association's prominence as a utopian community often goes unnoticed by literary scholars today, despite its attraction to various Northern antebellum

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<sup>14</sup> Whitmarsh was responsible for the original Northampton Silk Company, which Hill and the other founders of the Northampton Association bought and repurposed for their community in 1841, after the Company had declared bankruptcy.

thinkers, including many prominent literary figures, including Transcendentalists.<sup>15</sup> Through sericulture the Northampton Association was able to provide money and time for other intellectual activities. As Dolly Stetson, a member of the community, notes in a letter to her husband, the community was visited by the “eloquent fugitive” Frederick Douglass for a talk, one of many speakers on slavery – and one of Douglass’s two trips – to visit the community (Stetson 98). Sojourner Truth lived at the Association for three years, during which time her *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York in 1828* was written. One of the community’s founders and leaders, George Benson, was brother-in-law to William Lloyd Garrison, who spent a summer living there. Lydia Maria Child spent time living in Northampton between 1838 and 1841.<sup>16</sup> And the prominent abolitionist David Ruggles, who memorably helped secure the escape passage of the fugitive slave Frederick Douglass, also spent a number of years residing in the community. But apart from the intellectual pursuits available, for Dolly Stetson the true appeal lay in that the community provided the best possible means of building and spreading her family’s “moral power,” unable to be cultivated elsewhere because the family did “not have the wealth and station to render [it] worthy of notice” (Stetson 98). Stetson had written such to her husband, James Stetson, when he broached the idea of leaving the community. Only within the reformist

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<sup>15</sup> The Northampton Association occupies a rather unique position in its status as “utopian.” Although not quite Transcendentalist, not quite Fourierist, the Association was attractive to members representing both communities, as historian Marjorie Senechal notes that “Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Samuel May, Wendell Phillips, and other sympathizers stopped by to see how the experiment was going” (Senechal 33). Garrison visited for part of a summer and regularly exchanged letters with Benson. As Clark puts it, the Northampton Association was part of a broader movement to create “practical utopias” (Clark, “Introduction,” 8). For more on the Northampton Association’s status as a utopian community, see Christopher Clark, *The Communitarian Moment: The Radical Challenge of the Northampton Association*, especially pages 1-14.

<sup>16</sup> Child’s husband owned a nearby farm where he attempted to cultivate the sugar-beet, a crop more directly espousing abolitionist causes. Child was not a member of the Northampton Association, though she did have many contacts there, and helped procure Ruggles’ position within. For more on Child and Northampton, see Clark, *The Communitarian Moment*, 51-52.

community and through the cultivation of silk did Stetson believe they could increase their chances of enacting practical reform, especially as it related to abolitionism.

The success the Northampton Association found, brief as it was, lay in that it integrated the growth and factory production of silk, “and so avoid[ed] the social divisions that were growing up between farms and factories in New England” (Clark, *Communitarian*, 143). Members of the Northampton Association saw their profits from sericulture in more than just monetary terms. Indeed, the real profits of Northampton’s silk labor lay in its reason for Associationism, the development and usage of what Stetson called “moral power.” As Sarah Josepha Hale shows in her poem “The Silk-Worm,” (1848) the silk worm provides the material to develop an ethical outlook. Though Hale had no direct relationship with the Northampton Association, the poem helps illuminate the ways members thought about the labor of cultivating silk (see Appendix 2).

Utopian and capitalist advocates of sericulture alike frequently claimed women, the poor, elderly, and infirm, would receive the most benefit from cultivating silk.<sup>17</sup> Thus the silk worm in Hale’s poem is able to aid the “young girl” in her transition to adulthood. The presence of the silk-worm elicits maternal qualities, the young girl viewing the worm as her “charge,” as if it “were a nestling bird” (Hale 191). This transition from childhood to adulthood within the young girl elicits a parallel worldly transformation, whereby if one were to adopt similar qualities of love as that which the young girl shows the worm, “we might have a world as kind // As God has made it fair!” (192). The quality at the crux of both these transformations is that of “*usefulness*” (192), italicized in the original poem. Appropriating the same language which advocates used to praise silk cultivation, the girl’s love for the silk worm, if combined with “*usefulness*,” has the

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<sup>17</sup> This was a point frequently discussed in relation to sericulture. The House of Representatives’ 1826 Resolution asks what are “the best modes of treating the cocoon, and of obtaining the silk; and how far the labor of females, children, and old men, may be usefully employed in the culture of silk?” (Rush 14-15).

power to make the world a better place. And this is a mutually beneficial relationship, as in line 23 the silk worm serves as a stand-in “for every harmless thing” (192) in the world, whose uplift is equally necessary in making the world “as kind // As God has made it fair!” The members of the Northampton Association worked to such ends in their free time, welcoming black members as equals within the community. Former Association member Frances P. Judd remarks upon the spirit of abolitionism that pervaded the Association in his “Reminiscences” of his time spent in the community: “New people constantly came, drawn by sympathy of views on one subject or another; all were earnest in the anti-slavery cause” (Judd 116). For Hale and the Northampton Association, the development of ethics in association with silk comes primarily through the laboring process; at the Fruitlands community though, such ethical qualities were found inherent to the mulberry tree itself, even if unused for the cultivation of silk.

### ***Fruitlands and the *Morus Multicaulis****

Of all the radical peculiarities within the behavior and restrictions of the Fruitlands community, the growth of mulberry trees on the land is perhaps one of the strangest (fig. 1.2).<sup>18</sup> Although it is often noted that the mulberry trees were planted at Fruitlands by the proprietors, with Clara Sears claiming they were planted for the “propagation of silkworms” (Sears frontispiece), the purpose of the trees goes unmentioned by Bronson Alcott or Charles Lane in their discussions of the community.<sup>19</sup> Refusing to use the tree to produce silk – the mulberry tree leaves are the food of silkworms – because to do so would be engaging in “worm slaughter” (L.

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<sup>18</sup> Mike Volmar, Chief Curator of the Fruitlands museum, believes that Alcott and Lane planted white mulberry trees.

<sup>19</sup> Though scholars routinely point out that the trees existed at Fruitlands, they declare with varying degrees of certainty their purpose. Gutek and Gutek claim that “Alcott planted mulberry trees near the house for the cultivation of silkworms” (Gutek and Gutek 147), while Franklin Sanborn, a visitor to the community in 1908, notes that “In front of the house are now three mulberry trees, planted by the Alcotts (possibly for silk-worm feeding)” (Sanborn 83).



Alcott 164), a practice the community staunchly refused, the trees offered no practical benefit to the community besides their shady leaves. For even if they had no plans to sell or trade upon the products of the mulberry tree, they apparently had no aspirations of cultivating it either; such cultivation as traditionally practiced would require the boiling – killing – of the silkworms. Additionally, the tree provides further suggestion of the agrarian ineptitude for which the Fruitlands community is often faulted, as Sears notes that “The philosophers had planted three mulberry trees next the front door . . . so near the house that when they grew, the roots almost unsettled the foundations” (Sears 68).<sup>20</sup> Even so, the selection of mulberry trees, and the refusal to cultivate their leaves, speaks to the ways Northern agrarianism was ceding economic profits to idealist values.

Though mulberry trees do produce edible mulberries, in the nineteenth century the primary interest in the tree was its leaves.<sup>21</sup> Previous to 1830, sericulturalists primarily grew variations of the white mulberry, though a species of red mulberry was found to be native to America; both the white and red, however, required several years to fully develop.<sup>22</sup> After the tree leaves are harvested, they are fed to the silk worms, and after repeating this process for some

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<sup>20</sup> Volmar says that, indeed, one of the trees eventually did threaten to do just that and had to be removed.

<sup>21</sup> The growth of mulberries in America dates back as far as colonial Virginia in 1622, when King James I had white mulberry trees imported to the colony – being decreed preferable to the growth of tobacco – and encouraged the species’ continual cultivation and development. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Benjamin Franklin would also encourage silk cultivation. In every advocacy for growth of the mulberry tree that I have found, no mention is ever given to the mulberry fruit. See Rush, 13-18.

<sup>22</sup> John Clarke makes note of this in his survey of the difficulties faced by sericulturalists in the history of the United States when he cites a pamphlet titled “Report on the Mulberry and Sugar Beet, published during the second session of the twenty-fifth Congress,” as saying: “There were, perhaps, some other reasons which induced the people of this country to neglect this subject (the culture of silk) for so long a period. The white Italian mulberry, till within a few years, was the only variety cultivated, and this was unfit for use for several years. So that the cultivator was compelled to lose the use of his capital and labour for some years, before he had any prospect of remuneration” (qtd in Clarke 116). Senechal, however, reveals that “Even the *Morus multicaulis* took several years to mature” (Senechal 27-28), although it was frequently flaunted for its almost immediate availability.

time, the silk worm spins a cocoon, which upon completion is boiled so as to unravel the silk.<sup>23</sup> Once unraveled, the silk is meticulously spun into reels, or skeins, which can then be brought to market. Though advocates touted silk growing for the little time and labor it took to successfully cultivate, cultivating silk from the mulberry trees traditionally grown and found in America required at the very least several years of growth before having the potential to elicit profit.

On one level, the planting of the mulberry trees at Fruitlands serves as an expression of dissent against the interest in silk cultivation throughout the North, growing the tree but refusing to cultivate it out of moral principle and effectively abstaining from the market which growth of the tree signified. Such moral abstention was similar to the reason that Frederick L. H. Willis explains the community did not wear silk, as “Covering for the body was to be of linen only, since cotton, wool, and silk were not only the product of slave labor, but securable only through the murder of worms and sheep” (Willis 33). Louisa May Alcott, in “Transcendental Wild Oats,” echoes a similar proscription: “cotton, silk, and wool were forbidden as the product of slave-labor, worm-slaughter, and sheep-robbery” (L. Alcott 164). Unlike the rest of the community’s harvests, which were believed to “mature and ripen in substance for the needs of the community through Nature’s processes alone, unaided by any fertilization or even any labor saving the sowing and reaping” (Willis 31), the silkworm required human intervention to produce silk, being by this point domesticated to the extent that “If their food didn’t come to them, the worms would pine away and die” (Senechal 33). Even if the silkworm did spin a cocoon and was left to mature until it freed itself, the resulting moth would have ruined the silk in its process of escape,

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<sup>23</sup> Senechal describes how “A few families raised as much as 130 pounds of silk in a year. That is, they raised 390,000 silkworms (3,000 cocoons yield one pound of silk) and 5,000 mulberry trees (one pound of leaves feeds forty worms, and a mature mulberry tree produces two pounds in a season)” (Senechal 15). For more on the process of harvesting silk, see Senechal, *American Silk 1830-1930*, especially 14-19. For more on silk cultivation at the Northampton Association, see the same, 1-61, and Christopher Clark’s *The Communitarian Moment: The Radical Challenge of the Northampton Association*, especially 135-162.

shortly before dying moments later. Subject to the standards of the Fruitlands community, the mulberry trees they planted could have provided almost none of the practical functions for which Northern sericulturists so valued it. As Fruitlands shows, there was not a unified Northern voice on the value and potential of sericulture.

It is likely that the growth of the tree was an expression of the community's agricultural exceptionalism, the members' stout belief that the farmland would be prosperous if they only interacted with it in a more ethical manner. Indeed, Lane and Alcott boasted in "The Consociate Life" that because of their refusal to use manure or subject animals to any sort of labor in the field, the land would be "restored to its pristine fertility by the annual return of its own green crops" (Lane and Alcott 439). In the collected memoirs of Willis, who was "constantly and intimately connected with the Alcott family, as friend, boarder, or guest in their home" (Willis 11) from approximately the years 1844-1854, Willis notes that Alcott and Lane believed "No living thing upon the ninety acres of Fruitlands was to be destroyed, neither weed nor worm, since all living things were God's creatures entitled to their natural or preferred sustenance" (Willis 31). Barbara Packer offers a somewhat different explanation of Alcott and Lane's activities at Fruitlands: "Alcott and Lane proved fonder of talking about farming than of actually farming; during the harvest season they were off on a pilgrimage through New York and New England trying to enlist more members for Fruitlands, without success" (Packer 149). It is in this way that the selection of the mulberry tree to plant near the house makes the most sense. With no intentions of slaughtering worms, or of harvesting silk, the mulberry is deprived of what Alcott and Lane viewed to be its unethical value within the marketplace. By choosing the tree and using it as only a tree, the community deprived the mulberry of its economic value and replaced it with aesthetic value.

Amidst the height of interest in silk, though, Alcott and Lane's appreciation of the tree would have gone unnoticed, as advocates of the trade enflamed rapid speculation in a new genus of mulberry tree recently imported to the United States, the *morus multicaulis*. Much as Alcott and Lane attempted to compensate for their lack in husbandry skills by application to a strict ethical code that would ultimately lead not only to a bountiful harvest, to a "liberat[ion]" of the land from "human ownership" (Alcott and Lane 428), but to the reformation of society, so did the *morus multicaulis* promise to revitalize the agrarianism of the North.

### ***The New Northern Agrarianism***

The introduction of the *morus multicaulis* commenced what John Clarke called the third epoch of sericulture's history in the United States (the first from 1623-1783, the second from 1783 to 1830, and the third beginning after that). Clarke believed this new epoch would herald an era of success for silk cultivation, citing "evidence" that "two crops of silk may be raised in a single season" (Clarke 121).<sup>24</sup> Such an ability for rapid growth, In an editorial written by Gideon B. Smith for the *JASSRE*, Smith links such rapid growth as particularly suited to the American market: "It grows so rapidly that we can plant it this spring, and get a crop of silk from it this *summer!* Is this an objection to an American? Is not the speedy return of the proceeds of an investment the greatest recommendation that the investment of capital can have?" (G. Smith, "The Morus," 146-7).<sup>25</sup> Smith's parallel of the *multicaulis*'s growth and use to the returns on a

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<sup>24</sup> John Clarke was Superintendent of the Morodendron Silk Company of Philadelphia.

<sup>25</sup> The *JASSRE* ran from 1839-1840, under the editorship of Gideon B. Smith. It should be noted that Smith, who was widely credited with the discovery of the *morus multicaulis*, was also engaged in the business of selling the tree. Though a large number of the articles throughout the periodical are Smith praising or defending sericulture and the *morus multicaulis*, the journal served as the official organ of the American Silk Society, and reprints minutes and details of the Society's meetings. The *JASSRE* also contains various articles and letters written by people whom Smith thought portrayed some aspect of sericulture amenable to its advocacy.

capital investment speaks to a question routinely posed about the *multicaulis*: if the tree is so great, why is it not grown in other countries?

Arguments for why silk should be grown in America relied upon, at their core, a sense of America's agricultural exceptionalism. While pamphlets and magazines are replete with discussions about what makes America particularly suitable to growth of the mulberry tree, America was routinely contrasted to old Europe and China, the latter historically leading the silk trade in both quantity and quality. But it was just this sense of history that advocates of American sericulture sought to take advantage of, arguing the newness of America's land allowed it to take advantage of the *multicaulis*' newness. "Silk could be made from the *morus multicaulis* in almost every section of the Union," Smith explains, "We have no prejudices to contend with, no old orchards of other trees to get clear of, no bad habits to eradicate, as in Europe" (G. Smith, "Debates," 11). To Smith "The reason is obvious" why the *morus multicaulis* is not used in Europe, because "They must in the first place go to a very considerable expense in the purchase of the trees as we have to do; but in addition to this they have their old overgrown white mulberry trees to dig up and throw away" (11). Like Smith, other advocates routinely touted the mulberry's ability to grow "anywhere in the Union."

Such qualities were especially attractive to Northerners, as the sustainability of agriculture as both a trade and a lifestyle was rapidly diminishing as the frontier moved westwards towards the Ohio Valley. Despite being seen and viewed as particularly amenable to a life of ethical idealism by groups like Fruitlands, Northern agriculture was steadily losing its economic viability throughout the antebellum era. For this reason, Brook Farm attempted to "insure a more natural union between intellectual and manual labor" (Ripley 308) in a profession that was losing its practical value in the North. While Brook Farm desired to repurpose

agriculture to reinvigorate the individual, yielding moral and intellectual gains, silk promised the same in addition to revitalization of the land itself.

Outside of the utopian communities, however, interest in sericulture, as historians such as Gates and Clark argue, was largely manufactured by speculators in the *morus multicaulis* who were looking for quick and easy profits. Gideon B. Smith, regular contributor to the *JASSRE*, is often singled out as having especially stood to gain from the fervor over the multicaulis, though he was just one of many contributors to journals “which published and republished short accounts of silkgrowing that were calculated to arouse the cupidity and interest of readers” (Gates 303). The prices of the tree quickly and dramatically inflated, and there were many speculators and advocates for the trade who dealt almost exclusively in sales of the *morus multicaulis*, ignoring the supposedly higher profits from the cultivation of silkworms.<sup>26</sup> When the tree was affected by a damaging and widespread blight in the early 1840s, there was a “sharp reduction in interest in the silk business” (Gates 306), and silk did not regain such a level of national interest until the end of the nineteenth century.

As the frontier was pushed further west, it brought with it cheaper and more fertile land than that available in the Northeast, and both families and farms were quick to relocate. Precipitated by the increased industrialization of the Northeast, as well as the advent of steam power and the railroad, what Henry Nash Smith calls “virgin land” held increasing symbolic power as it became more easily accessible further and further out west, prompting the relocation of many Northern farmers. Corporations, as well, were responsible in drawing farmers further west, Gates explaining how “Hill farmers listened entranced to the blandishments of the representatives of the Holland Land Company or the Ohio Land Company, who optimistically

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<sup>26</sup> Senechal says that “Between 1835 and 1839 the price of young mulberry trees and cuttings, especially the *Morus multicaulis* variety, catapulted from three or five dollars a hundred to as much as five hundred dollars” (Senechal 27).

described the lush soils and economic opportunities of the Genesee Valley of New York or the Muskingum Valley of Ohio” (Gates 27). When such farmers did move west, they typically brought their families with them. Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman explain the reason why: “Rather than scatter the family through the migration of younger sons to western lands, break up the eastern family farm into uneconomic units, or try to buy sufficient land in the immediate area to satisfy family inheritances, the entire family would move westward to a location where the proceeds from the sale of an eastern farm would buy a substantially larger one” (Atack and Bateman 10). For these farmers, financial success depended upon the maintenance of domestic units.

Farmers who remained behind in the Northeast were faced with the problem of decreased profits from their agrarian labor. The most notable reaction to this problem, Clarence Danhof details, was a “laudation of [farming’s] values” (Danhof 24), values perceived as absent from the city. The virtue of agrarian labor became divided along sectional lines, in both literature and politics. For the South, George Fitzhugh’s *Cannibals All!* sums up the aristocratic contempt landholders held towards agrarian labor, the most common laborer of which being the slave: “Agricultural labor is the most arduous, least respectable, and worst paid of all labor. Nature and philosophy teach all who can to avoid and escape from it, and to pursue less laborious, more respectable, and more lucrative employments. None work in the field who can help it. Hence free society is in great measure dependent for its food and clothing on slave society” (Fitzhugh 335). It was Fitzhugh’s deprecation of agrarian labor that Northern authors like Day Kellogg Lee attempted to denounce by emphasizing the moral qualities associated with farming. Indeed, Lee’s *Summerfield: Or, Life on a Farm*, provides a different account of farming in the North, where he describes that while performing agrarian labor,

Your strength increases, and you assist in the labors of the field. You plant corn and weed it; and in that act you sow the seeds of energy and hope in your soil, and weed it of vices and weakly shoots. You cut down fireweeds and thistles; and still dress your soul withal, more and more. You set deadfalls for corn-pulling squirrels; and entrap with the squirrels your follies and fears. You watch with a watering mouth the growing melons and blackening berries; and find sweeter than all, the melons of health, arid berries and rural bliss. (Lee, *Summerfield*, 49)

The success of the farm provides a metaphor for the soul of the farmer, being weeded of vices and growing into plentiful health and bliss, the farm and farmer both being purified and cultivated for growth.

Emerson describes a similar result in his 1858 address “Farming,” wherein the farmer serves as the model laborer, since “The farmer is a hoarded capital of health, as the farm is the capital of wealth; and it is from him that the health and power, moral and intellectual, of the cities came. The city is always recruited from the country” (Emerson, “Farming,” 87). The individualism Lee and Emerson touch upon would even be shared by political groups, the Whig party adopting the slogan of “Vote Yourself a Farm.” Such praise of the agrarian lifestyle could not slow the North’s increasing industrialization, Gates reminding us that “Agriculture in the northeastern states, particularly in the New England states, was early displaced in importance in the minds of their statesmen by commerce and industry. Consequently, its problems were given little attention in Congress and in the press” (Gates 22). The moral values that accompanied farming, clear from advocates such as Lee and Emerson, were not able to make farming especially appealing as an economic pursuit within the New England region.

Indeed, much of the farmland in the Northeast, as residents of Fruitlands were quick to discover, was losing its practicability for those skilled in husbandry. Apart from being unable to compete with the lower prices and larger acreage of farmland out West, Northeastern farmland could not compete with the fertility of the Ohio River Valley. Atack and Bateman explain that



“With few exceptions, suitable farmlands did not exist in the East by this time” (Atack and Bateman 10). Though the farmers who did not relocate along the Frontier could be told how valuable their lifestyle and work was, it became harder to maintain a financially profitable family farm.

All of this led to a caricature of the Northern farm, perpetuated by

Western land and settlement promoters and southern politicians ... [who] present[ed] a distorted picture of the Northeast. New England’s thin, unproductive soil covered with rocks and boulders, its steep and rugged slopes ... its long, harsh winters ... its early frosts and short growing season, its nagging women, fretting children, tight-fisted and hard-hearted farmers, and shrewd storekeepers ever ready to cheat the unwary were all part of the caricature of New England shaped by its critics. (Gates 23)

These caricatures of Northern farmland made silk an especially attractive crop, as advocates envisioned its ability to revitalize the Northern farmland. Indeed, sericulture promised to resurrect Northern agrarianism, both economically and conscientiously.

Though advocates routinely touted silk’s ability to be grown “anywhere in the Union,” the rhetoric used to explain how to grow the mulberry at times seemed to be targeted towards Northern farmers. For instance, besides the caricature Gates gives above, he also provides an example from the *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette* that describes the North in this way:

‘Such barren lands, such rocks and sands,  
And then, good Lord! So hilly.’ (Gates 23n2)

It just so happens, regularly claimed the *JASSRE*, that rocky, sandy, and hilly land provided the very best growing conditions for the *morus multicaulis*. The journal would at times specifically target the cultural and economic conditions surrounding Northern agriculture, linking the *morus multicaulis* with the promise of economic and domestic revitalization. “There is still another view of this subject which is of great importance,” claimed “An Address to the People of the United States” in the inaugural 1839 issue of the *JASSRE*,

In all of these [the Atlantic states] we find large quantities of land, either naturally poor, or so reduced by culture as to yield no profit to the cultivator. The consequence is, that the people of these states are rapidly emigrating to the more fertile regions of the west to seek a subsistence for themselves and their families . . . Now it fortunately happens, that poor, sandy, and almost worn-out lands yield the very best of silk; and although the quantity will not be so large as from more fertile lands, the profits will be such as to leave no inducement to the inhabitants to leave the homes of their fathers. (Smith, Gibbons, and Gummere 30-31)

The article quickly assuages all of the concerns facing Northern agriculturalists: the reduction in available land; the emigration of farmers and family members to more fertile land out west; and the condition of the land quality left in the North. Not only is the condition of Northern land workable for the *morus multicaulis*, but Gideon Smith would claim, in “Cultivation of the Morus Multicaulis” that it is the ideal crop for such conditions: “Sandy soils and high situations are always to be selected, if possible. The soil can scarcely be too sandy. Indeed the finest trees the writer ever saw, grew in a soil too sandy for any other crop” (G. Smith, “Cultivation,” 81). Cultivating the mulberry in such conditions is not only conducive to the growth of the plant, but to the quality of the resulting silk, as the article “Mulberry and Sugar Beet” asserts: “The mulberry will grow on high, stony, sandy, and comparatively barren land; and although the poverty of the soil may decrease the quantity of foliage, it will improve the quality, and add fineness and beauty to the silk” (“Mulberry” 106-107). And as Atack and Bateman describe how many Northern farmers were increasingly diversifying their products to increase their profits, which in turn “produced higher income levels but demanded more work from the farmer” (Atack and Bateman 10), the *morus multicaulis* even provided a solution for that, promising very little time and labor while simultaneously revitalizing the soil. Indeed, “Mulberry and Sugar Beet” promised sericulture “would introduce to the farmer new and valuable, and . . . profitable productions; which, in rotation with other crops, would have a doubly beneficial effect on our agricultural interests. It would improve our lands, increase the amount of productive industry,

and condense, improve, and enrich our population” (“Mulberry” 106). The state of Northern agriculture was yearning for an economic complement to farming’s moral qualities, and sericulture offered that promise.

### ***Sectionalist Silk***

The relationship between ethics and agrarian labor largely drove and sustained the ideological power of sericulture. As Clarke put it, “We now see that not only individuals, farmers, and planters, but also legislators, have risen from a comparative lethargy. Not only *private*, but *national* interest, is on the tapis” (Clarke 119). Though Clarke’s *A Treatise on the Mulberry Tree and Silkworm* (1839) lays the modest hope of “becom[ing] equal in wealth and independence, and infinitely superior in intelligence” (119) to China, the elected members of the American Silk Society routinely pushed this idea further. By decreasing the importation of silk while increasing its exportation, the American Silk Society saw potential to monopolize the silk trade and become exceedingly rich, and, as reported in the *JASSRE*, formally resolved at a convention “that silk may be grown in all the United States, not only for domestic purposes, but as a valuable article of commercial export—thereby giving active employment to American labour, and retaining millions of dollars in our country, that are annually sent out of it for the purchase of silken goods” (“National” 3). According to the American Silk Society, the true benefit of silk cultivation was not the financial gains it brought about, but the benefit it brought to “American labour,” here characterized by their gain of “active employment.” In other articles on silk however, the benefits to the laborer are where sectional distinctions began to be drawn: the cultivation of silk often brings increased utility and personal development to the unemployed

in Northern articulations of the debate, while in Southern arguments the benefit often boiled down to the ability to increase the labor and profits from slaves.

For example, Phillip Physick, a Northerner, states in an editorial in the *JASSRE* the ease with which the silk business, “in all its branches,” can allow “men and women, boys and girls, young and old, the crippled and infirm, high and low, ... [to become] actively and profitably employed, without causing a blush to mantle on the cheek of any” (Physick 304). As another article put it, the result of this equalization of employment opportunities would mean “The whole community would be benefited by the services and labours of all such, and an impetus be given to the advancement of morals and intelligence” (“Culture” 376). The “advancement of morals and intelligence” was not an isolated or minor thread in this discussion, as it became a formal resolution of the Executive Committee of the American Silk Society. At their annual convention in 1838, the Executive Committee declared

there are no occupations that promise more to ameliorate the moral and physical condition of a large portion of our population, and to elevate them in the scale of intellectual and moral worth, than those involved in the culture of silk. Poor children, indigent females, the lame and infirm of both sexes, and all ages, will find in this branch of industry employment lucrative, health and moral.  
 (“American” 7)

Such declarations as these highlight the sectional differences between Northern and Southern labor in the cultivation of silk. Though these passages and similar ones appearing in the *JASSRE* often make no specific regional distinctions to label them as Northern, the differences become clear when compared to those articles that articulate a decidedly Southern perspective.

In another editorial in the *JASSRE*, “Experiments in Silk Culture in Virginia” (1839), James O. Breeden remarks that he

feel[s] very sanguine that the culture of silk is to be a source of profitable employment in Virginia, and throughout the states. I find that our small negro girls and boys, say from 8 to 12 year old, are very apt at the business, they can

feed the worms, clean the hurdles, &c. . . . I speak from experience, and in fact, they can be taught the whole science in one season—consequently, we must succeed, even were we too indolent to perform the labour ourselves. (Breedon 278)

The indolence that Physick had seen stemming from idleness and relative physical weakness is, for Breedon, a luxury for the slaveholding class. A separate letter to the *JASSRE* extolling the development in silk culture in North Carolina remarks how one slaveholder “may be considered a pioneer in silk business for our more southern states. . . . His negro children have been learned to feed worms and reel silk” (Weller 140). For this man, the moral and intellectual advancement of the poor is absent, substituted by the increased profits from teaching his slaves an additional trade to supplement his income. Clarke echoes this notion of increased profits from slaves in *A Treatise*: “Experiments have been made, whose results have satisfied the planters that the young, aged, and infirm portion of their slaves can be profitably employed in the culture of silk: and there is little doubt that in a short time many of them will make a silk as well as a cotton crop” (Clarke 131). Whereas national advocates for silk cultivation noted its potential to elevate and improve the individual, Southern advocates noted its ability to make slaves more useful and profitable to the slaveholder.

Of course the moralism that accompanied the proposed elevation of workers through agrarian labor is a common trope throughout the antebellum era in the North, a staple of free labor idealism. But the silk movement nicely illustrates a specifically *Northern* form of moralism. Take for example a more direct comparison between two competing arguments for why to help two groups of those “helpless” laborers who are unable to successfully contribute to agrarian production: the first group Northern whites; the second Southern slaves.

**Example One: “The Humbug” (1839)**

We shall behold a large helpless class of the community, that now can scarcely earn twenty cents a day with their needles, and upon which pittance they must

live,—*live* did we say? no, endure life,—from which pittance they must pay house-rent, and support—or sustain life in half a dozen helpless little ones—these we shall see comfortably providing for themselves and families by making silk. Our worn-out old fields and waste lands, will then be covered with mulberry orchards, and dotted with the comfortable cottages and cocooneries of silk growers. (G. Smith, “The Humbug,” 321-22)

In Gideon B. Smith’s example, the landscape itself is transformed, revitalized and repurposed towards the growth of silk, a utopian vision of a restored countryside leading to economic success and independence. The profits from such a venture affect not only the individual laborers, formerly “helpless” and struggling to “endure life” but now “comfortably providing for themselves and families,” but also the entire nation, collectively on the move to become economically prosperous and independent. The utopian vision the first example presents is contrasted by the wealthy capitalist of the Southern plantation in the second example.

**Example Two: “Address of Rev. D. V. McLean, of New Jersey” (1839)**

On all the plantations of the south, too, there are undoubtedly many—children, aged, and infirm slaves, and *mothers*—who are of little or no value to their owners in the production of sugar and cotton. . . .

Now, if these could be furnished with an employment by which they could simply support themselves, what a vast saving it would be to the planter? But how much more would his interest be promoted, if it is demonstrated that the labour of such a class, when applied to silk, is even more profitable than the labour of the most athletic field hands. (McLean 388)

For McLean there are no “helpless” laborers, only slaves “of little or no value to their owners,” conforming to the myth of what historian Jonathan Glickstein terms in *American Exceptionalism, American Anxiety*, as economic exceptionalism. “Economic Exceptionalism” describes a situation in which antebellum “disagreements as to the prevalence, and the relative efficacy and morality, of such [negative work] incentives coexisted with a mythology of American exceptionalism that alternatively extolled the salience and the benefits (both economic and therapeutic) of more exclusively positive labor incentives (e.g., the hope of improvement commonly held to animate northern wage laborers)” (Glickstein 2). In other words, the same

labor that in these examples provides a moralist incentive of personal responsibility and social ascension for the Northern “helpless” laborers, the Southern slave is denied, having instead their labor redirected towards the capitalist slaveholder’s profits. Indeed, the key comparison between Northern and Southern sericulture is the moral versus monetary profits gained from cultivating silk.

It is not just that Southerners are not interested in providing meaningful labor to the disenfranchised laborers that distinguishes them from the Northerners, but that their investment in cotton creates habits nonexistent in the North. “Cotton is a fine gentleman that lives high, spends much, and promises well,” claimed John Smith in the *JASSRE*, “but it is a very uncertain paymaster. . . He may suit the south very well, but his general habits of extravagance and want of punctuality are altogether unsuited to a plain agricultural people, with whom labour should be esteemed the best capital, and industry the surest profit” (J. Smith 369). The Southerner, who is depicted as pursuing the lofty yet fickle promises of cotton, is contrasted to the “plain agricultural people” for whom cotton is “unsuited,” the people of the North whose own labor ensures more financial success than the uncertain promises of cotton. As advocates of silk routinely forewarned, the collapse of the cotton trade was inevitable given the profitability of silk.

The North Carolina newspaper *The Fayetteville Observer* embedded the conversation over Southern silk even further in the language of capitalism, depicting non-working slaves not merely as a hindrance to the slaveowner’s profits, but as mere consumers. The article “*Morus Multicaulis – The Silk Culture*,” reprinted in *The Fayetteville Observer* in 1838 from the *Richmond Enquirer*, endorses sericulture in the South, saying the climate is surely more conducive than that of the North, and that “We have also other advantages (which we have

several times before urged) in our far cheaper land, and cheaper slave-labour. Many slaves could be producers who now are merely consumers” (J.W. 2). In such depictions, silk becomes imbued with the post-1837 Panic language in the South, serving as the embodiment of the mythos that the major problem with the South’s economy is that Southerners are consumers of Northern products that they can produce themselves, and here that anxiety is placed upon the slave. A later issue of *The Fayetteville Observer* in 1838 takes this even further in a reprint from the *Farmer’s Register*:

There are very few farms, on which there are not some slaves who are too young, or too old, or otherwise too infirm, for any common labor, and who, therefore, do nothing, and are a dead expense in their maintenance. These, now worthless and expensive consumers, would be precisely suited, and perfectly competent to perform all the labors of a silk establishment, under the direction of an intelligent and careful conductor, male or female. Indeed in many cases, without any hired supervisor, a farmer’s industrious wife, with her before useless slaves, might make a crop of cocoons that would sell for half as much money as her husband’s surplus grain crop. (Compiler 1)

Here, the position of the “useless slaves” allegorizes the South’s dependency upon Northern trade. The slaves are depicted as “a dead expense in their maintenance,” an inevitable byproduct of the plantation economy which taxes its profits. By cultivating silk on the plantation under the supervision of “a farmer’s industrious wife,” the formerly “dead expense[s]” are repurposed so as to supplement the plantation’s main profits, the “grain crop” mentioned in the final line. Within the plantation economy, silk provides a way to supplement profits at no increased expense, and without Northern influence.

To this depiction of the importance of Southern sericulture, the Northern abolitionist periodical *The Emancipator* replied: “Speed it on” (“Silk Culture at the South” 120). Reprinted in *The Liberator*, the editorial commented upon the South’s interest in silk: “Our southern exchange papers boast a good deal against the plans for silk culture at the North, and say the



South will surely engross the business. Let them. One effect of it will be, to increase the intelligence of the slaves. Another will be to remove many poor women slaves from the crushing toils of the cotton field. . . . Speed it on. (“Silk Culture at the South” 120). The ethics that Northerners associated with sericulture transcend sectional boundaries, and the profits derived from it are here shown to be of benefit not solely to the slaveholder, but to all members who are involved in the process. The futurity of the South’s involvement in the business – that they “will surely engross” it – will foster the mental and physical development of the slave. *The Liberator’s* own article, “Light in the South,” presented sericulture in the South not only as a means of personal empowerment, but as a more effective substitute for abolitionism:

A slaveholder told me the other day . . . that he *believed it* [silk culture] *would undermine the whole slave system* . . . and I trust you and I may see the day that the accursed thing is done away—for already *you are beginning to make us believe that it SHOULD be done, and WILL be done, but we had rather it would be brought about by silk than northern interference.* (“Light” 4)

What makes silk so attractive to the abolitionist cause is here expressed as its ability to materialize an ethical stance disassociated from sectional politics; free from “northern interference,” the ethics inherent within sericultural labor will manifest themselves. “Two great staples of the United States of North America,” mused Clarke in *A Treatise*, “are now in our diorama—*Cotton* and *Silk*; but which is to become the greater, is the question. . . of the two, cotton or silk, the latter eventually is to become the greater, the more important staple of this country” (Clarke 4-5). Clarke’s prediction shows the ways the idealism that Northerners had applied to sericulture could be transferred into practical means, an economic power reflective of Northern ethics. As the Northern abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* framed it, those practical means would become evidenced not by the profits stemming from sericulture, but by the ethical strides its cultivation preceded, namely the abolition of slavery.

Silk eventually overtaking the profitability of cotton was, advocates of the industry claimed, inevitable. Besides the “ample testimony” that interest in silk was “steadily advancing with an increasing rapidity such that it was evident that it would soon have to dispute with every other staple within the limits of the Union” (Clarke 121-2), the articles published in the *JASSRE* routinely viewed silk as filling an increasing void left by cotton. One such article, republished from *The Knoxville Register*, states: “we look forward with confidence to the time, not far distant either, when silk will become one of our most profitable staples. As our cotton districts are fast moving south, we believe the culture of silk may and will be profitably introduced to supply the place of that article” (“The Spread” 87). The prospect of the economic gains of silk usurping those of cotton are echoed in an article on the Chinese Mulberry in 1834, quoting “an intelligent and enterprising gentleman in Northampton” as saying “The time is not far distant, when New England will produce Silk equal in value to the Cotton of the South” (“Article 2” 291). Besides the differences in laboring techniques between silk and cotton, here silk is defined as a staple crop explicitly competing with cotton for agricultural dominance. Cotton is depicted as an “uncertain paymaster” whose area of growth is being pushed further south, and silk had the potential to fill the voids cotton was leaving, carrying with it a distinct set of ethics that would ultimately prove more effective than the efforts of abolitionists.

### ***Silk’s Secret Amelioration***

That silk was not solely the object of a few greedy businessmen looking to take advantage of others or of radical idealists is evidenced by the ways advocates spoke of silk when they did not have such staunch capitalist or idealist aspirations. To be sure, critiques of silk advocates and journals that helped enflame the “multicaulis mania” are warranted, but once the

idealism they were proffering took hold, it exceeded the bounds of both their control and the market's, extending beyond the burst of the silk bubble. For the editors of the New York *The Colored American*, a weekly African-American periodical that ran from 1837-1841, silk offered hopes of financial success and independence for black Americans living in the North.

*The Colored American*, Donald Jacobs argues, appeared at a time when “the concern for the well-being of one’s brethren remained strong within the Black community” (Jacobs 230). As a whole, *The Colored American* desired to improve the social and civic participation of its Northern black readers, often publishing pieces, especially in its early issues, meant to educate its readers on American and world history. These yearnings affected the publication’s discussion on agriculture, often emphasizing the communal nature of the profession. Indeed, *The Colored American* routinely touted and praised the profession of farming for its readers, claiming “Farming is the policy for colored Americans” (“Important” 3), and “That farming is the best policy, and the best occupation for colored Americans, we have always thought, *and always SAID*” (“Husbandry” 3).

For all of the suggestions that farming be pursued by its readers, *The Colored American* did relatively little to suggest the practical means of pursuing the trade, at times offering pieces of advice on the joys of gardening and what vegetables could be grown, and at one point running a single brief article urging the growth of “Mr. Thorburn’s ‘Chinese Seed Corn’” (“Increase” 2).<sup>27</sup> However, three years into the run of the publication, after regular praise, advocacy, and attempts to help its readers engage in farming, *The Colored American* began a ten-part series on how to properly grow and cultivate silk, its single greatest attempt to provide readers with practical advice on how to become farmers and establish financial independence. Before the first

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<sup>27</sup> “Our highest ambition, in a pecuniary point of view, for our brethren, would be to see each family of them possessed of 200 acres of good land, in some healthy part of the United States, with good buildings and well stocked, and a plenty of “Mr. Thorburn’s ‘Chinese Seed Corn’” (“Increase” 2).

article in the series the editors commented upon why they were devoting such a lengthy run and large amount of space to articles on silk:

We are giving on our 4<sup>th</sup> page and shall continue to give weekly, large extracts from the ... approved works on the growing and manufacturing of silk. This, to us, appears to be a ... important subject. The silk business, no doubt, for years to come will not only be a very useful but a very profitable business. It can be commenced and carried on, in all parts of the country, with very little capital.

We know of no business, except if be market gardening, which so commends itself to the situation and means of colored men. Its simplicity, its easy progress in extension, its manage-... by females, children and aged infirmity, ... its saleableness all, all, commend themselves ... our notice and experiment.

We hope our people, as many as have it in their power, and have not a better business, will take hold of this subject. Brethren let us no longer be behind others in our enterprise and ... God has made us equal, mentally and physically, to any other race of men.—Let us practically demonstrate the fact. (“Silk Culture [1]” 2)

In this rationale, the futurity of the silk trade parallels the future of the African-American race.

The ability of silk to be grown anywhere in the country – which other advocates had similarly praised – is made to parallel the case for racial equality, as “God has made us equal, mentally and physically, to any other race of men,” just as silk can be cultivated anywhere in the country, so can it be cultivated by anyone. That the “silk business, no doubt, for years to come will not only be a very useful but a very profitable business” provides the vehicle for African-Americans to likewise demonstrate their usefulness within and membership of society, which had been presented as the true benefit of “agricultural pursuits,” allowing them to “practically demonstrate the fact” that “God has made us equal.”

After the last article in the silk series was published, the paper ran a small piece commenting on the extracts. The article starts with employing the same fraternal language as that in the first article, using the words “brethren” and “our people.” But whereas the cultivation of silk was previously described in terms of its relationship to the larger group, here in the closing remarks it is transformed into individual responsibility: “Who will remain poor and dependant

when the road to wealth is so easy, and the labor required so inconsiderable?” (“Silk Culture [2]” 3). The larger group had worked to do its part – the paper had provided the extracts, which they hoped “have been filed by our brethren, and that they will be perused and reperused, until the simple method of producing one of the most important articles for profit in sale or beauty and durability in wear, is perfectly understood by them all” (3) – but the remaining path to wealth lay in what the paper frames as the responsibility of individual empowerment. Though the profits of silk moved from the collective group to the individual, the ethics that silk developed moved from the individual to the collective sectional community.

Even though sericulture never did outweigh the value of cotton, largely defeated in the early 1840s, it shows the ways that the possibility of a new agricultural crop quickly became wrapped up in sectionalist debates over capitalism and slavery. Though cultivation of the crop did not necessitate the presence of a large slave labor force, the ways that the cultivation, utility, and profits of silk became split along sectional lines highlights not only cultural differences between the North and South in regards to the ethics of labor, but the ways capitalisms developed differently throughout the antebellum era. The timing of the silk craze, in the years immediately following the Panic of 1837 — the moment when the South was purposefully trying to distance itself from trade with the North, moving to monopolize the global cotton trade — shows a divergence in the ways American capitalisms developed: in the South an emphasis on the profits for the owners of trade; in the North a concern with each individual’s means of economic development. Though these divergent capitalisms would develop differently, slavery equally affected their development in both regions. As we will see in the coming chapters, for all the labor reform that came after the silk movement, the relationship between ethics and labor provided the backbone to the questions, critiques, and shape of Northern capitalism.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **THE PICTURESQUE MANUFACTORY: THE AESTHETICS OF NON-SLAVE LABOR**

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 display, alternately, the two predominant types of labor in antebellum America, slave and wage. At first glance, David Hunter Strother's illustration of Southern slaves (fig. 2.1) – featured in John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1853) – may not seem to have much in common with the 1845 title page of the *Lowell Offering* (fig. 2.2), showing a mill girl taking a stroll. But closer inspection reveals a number of similarities: both images use tree branches to frame the scene and both persons are seen in different acts of leisure (though Kennedy's text describes the slaves pictured as mischievous). Artistic similarities aside, slavery plays a prominent role in why each image is presented the way it is.

Strother's image appears when Kennedy describes how one of the slaves on the Hazard family plantation, Abe, has become of such an immoral character so as to be “offensive to the whole plantation” (Kennedy 467). For the good of the plantation and out of respect for Abe's slave mother, the novel's narrator Littleton claims, Hazard decides to remove Abe from the plantation by sending him out to sea, a supposed act of amnesty and benevolence for Abe's future well-being. Abe's supposed “mischievousness,” as represented in the picture, rationalizes the paternalistic control Hazard must exert over his slave, lest he disrupt and corrupt the rest of the plantation.

Though not a slave, the mill girl in the right image is subject to a similar type of paternalistic gaze. However, in this scene, rather than attempting to control the woman herself, the image exerts control over the surrounding environment. The woman appears in an idyllic foreground, book in hand, demonstrating her leisure time and capacity for intellectual development. In the background appears the mill, emphasizing her distance from employment, and a church steeple, her capacity for religious and moral development. The woman looks toward the beehive, positioning her as the medium between natural and human industry. The

carefully composed scene renders the factory a societal mirror of the natural order, the factory being the more advanced iteration of the beehive. The woman, positioned between the foreground and background, balancing spiritual and intellectual development with economic sustenance and independence, strikes a unity between industry and nature. This Northern wage laborer, the picture exclaims, is not the same as a slave.

As the comparison of these images demonstrates, the relationship of Southern slavery to Northern textile manufactories presented both a conceptual and ethical problem for Northern capitalists and laborers alike. With the advent of the North's industrialization and epitomized by such urban centers as Lowell, Massachusetts, Fall River, Massachusetts, and Nashua, New Hampshire, the Northern landscape and laborscape were increasingly populated by wage laborers. These urban sites were critiqued as centers of vice and moral depravity, eliciting nostalgia for an agrarian culture that was slipping away. Especially for the numerous young women employed in Northern textile mills, the oppressiveness of industrial labor invited frequent comparisons to plantation slavery, creating terms such as "wage slavery" and "white slavery."<sup>28</sup>

The rise of Northern industrialism solidified the North's economic dependency upon Southern cotton, a crop they could not substitute through their own agricultural endeavors or through trade with foreign nations. This dependency caused a number of ethical quandaries for Northerners, namely how Northern industrial labor was not equally responsible for the continuation of Southern slavery, complicit with its continued existence. Thus the members of Fruitlands chose to wear no cotton garments, David Lee Child experimented with growing beet

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<sup>28</sup> For more on these terms and their employment by Northern white laborers, see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*. The applicability of these terms to mill girls proved a divisive subject for the women themselves, epitomized by the eventual rift between Harriet Farley and Sarah Bagley, editors of the literary periodical *The Lowell Offering*. Bagley came to think the *Offering* did not go far enough in critiquing the laboring conditions within the mills and eventually left the *Offering* to join the more critical *Voice of Industry*.



sugar, and Northern farmers experimented with other textiles such as silk. As increasing numbers of New England women began working in the textile manufactories that were populating spaces once used for farming, critics such as Orestes Brownson worried the North was becoming more and more like the South, its changing workspaces developing an uncanny resemblance to the Southern plantation.

To resolve this unflattering comparison and distance themselves from imagery of the plantation, pro-industrialists throughout the antebellum era attempted to change the way people *looked* at factory labor. The depictions of factory life used in marketing pamphlets and commissioned paintings sought a middle-ground that unified the benefits of industrialism with Northern anxieties over both a fading agrarian culture and the spread of Southern slavery (both territorially and as a mode of labor). To do so, depictions of factory life turned to the picturesque, a popular style and theory of landscape painting and design popular in the nineteenth century, in order to present a more aesthetically pleasing vision of industrialism. What sustains the imaginative middle-ground in these representations, I claim, is the ethical impulse it generates, the desire to reconcile industrialism and agrarianism, wage labor and domestic prosperity.

This aestheticizing of industrial spaces performed a distinct kind of cultural work within the North. In the South, the picturesque was often used for what Christopher Hanlon describes as an idealization of the “social economies of human bondage” (Hanlon 101), using the pastoralism of the picturesque to valorize both slavery and Southern capitalism. In the North, I argue, picturesque depictions of factory life entwined domestic and moral prosperity with increased industrialism, rationalizing the spread and growth of Northern industry by presenting itself as a more ethical means of labor than its Southern counterpart. Depicted in what I call the ethical aesthetic, industrial spaces become representational sites where the values of republicanism are

invigorated rather than eschewed, where the women who occupy such spaces are promised economic, moral, and domestic prosperity. Within such a space, Northern mill girls are represented as comfortably removed from the threats of plantation slavery.

Creating this ethical aesthetic, whereby urban industrial sites are re-imagined in the picturesque mode, imbued the worksites with a specifically sectionalist and capitalist ethos. Given industrialism's rapid increase, the North needed to articulate how this new work site would be compatible with the region's cultural values, the republican and agrarian values of the landscape industrialism was replacing. The easiest way to do so was to directly contrast themselves to representations of slavery. Thus, I suggest that slavery underscores and informs, directly or indirectly, representations of Northern factory life throughout the antebellum era. These presentations of Northern industrial spaces, through usage of the ethical aesthetic and picturesque mode, used the domestic virtue of mill girls as a way to articulate anxieties over Northern industrialism's dependency upon Southern slave labor.<sup>29</sup>

For the manufactory owners themselves, the very nature of the factory, its unpicturesque dissonance within the landscape and laborscape, necessitated the need for paternalist control. While similar to the paternalist control that Southern planters exhibited over plantation sites, seen in Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* and Henry Lewis's *A Cotton Plantation*, Northern manufacturers continually insisted they had the best interests of the female factory operatives at heart, as seen through their boarding-house regulations. Though at first this rationalization sounds like a rehashed argument used by slavery apologists, Northern manufacturers expressed this paternalism not by exhibiting control over laborers, but over the landscape itself.

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<sup>29</sup> The bulk of the industrial spaces I focus on are of textile manufactories, disproportionately located in the Northeast. These Northern manufactories, particularly the ones located along the Merrimack River, were a frequent source of artistic representations of textile factories.

While emphasizing the distinction between white wage and black slave labor served to the benefit of the manufacturers, the women employed within these industrial spaces were able to present a more nuanced critique of Northern industrialism. Using the picturesque mode to question their relationship to Southern slavery, contemporary labor songs and laborers such as Lucy Larcom express anxieties over the connection between slavery and industrialism, and the often direct impact this relationship had upon women's physical and spiritual bodies.

Lastly, I explore dissenting voices such as Catherine Williams, who utilized the picturesque mode in her novel *Fall River* to present a veiled critique of the responsibility of corporate manufactories. Northern representations of factory life were initially concerned with attempting to unify the factory with the landscape, though as time went on artists increasingly tried to make sure such spaces adhered to the cultural and ethical standards of the region. However, Williams shows the ways that the picturesque fails to live up to this promise, in many ways using the picturesque to absolve industrialism of any blame when things go wrong.

The picturesque offered the opportunity not only to present and respond to the various criticisms of industrial labor, but, most importantly, to change the way industrial spaces were viewed in the landscape. Even if the way people thought about industrialism could not be changed, the ethical aesthetic offered an alternative view of the factory and its laborers as a part of the natural Northern landscape and a natural progression of Northern democracy. The resounding and most important message of this movement was a simple, overwhelming statement: white mill girls are not black plantation slaves.

### *Creating the Industrial Picturesque*

The picturesque was a movement in landscape painting that began in England in the late eighteenth century, influenced by such prominent artists and theorists as William Gilpin and Uvedale Price. The guiding goal of this aesthetic ideal was to imbue landscapes (both real and artistic) with picture-like qualities. Its popularity, in both England and America, continued well into the nineteenth century and affected a wide range of art: landscape painting, landscape design, architecture, and literature. In America, the movement was popularized by artists such as Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, and Thomas Addison Richards, as well as authors such as James and Susan Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, and John Pendleton Kennedy.

While landscape theorists debated the merits and components of the picturesque, it was most often defined in contrast to the beautiful and the sublime. As Gilpin describes it in *Three Essays: on Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (1794), “Disputes about beauty might perhaps be involved in less confusion, if a distinction were established, which certainly exists, between such objects as are *beautiful*, and such as are *picturesque*—between those, which please the eye in their *natural state*; and those, which please from some quality, capable of being *illustrated by painting*” (Gilpin, *Three*, 3). Though picturesque scenes could have characteristics of the beautiful and sublime, there were several generally agreed upon features particular to the picturesque: the presence and usage of ruins; roughness over smoothness; three distinct areas within the composition (the foreground, middle-ground, and background); and a view typically presented from a privileged vantage point. Frequently, the picturesque was purposely meant to invoke some sense of nostalgia.

In America, the picturesque is perhaps most strongly associated with the artists coming out of the Hudson River School in the 1850s, inspired by the earlier work of artists such as

Thomas Cole from the 1830s and 1840s. Even so, American and British artists regularly debated what constituted the picturesque within America and whether the distinctly European aesthetic could exist outside of Europe. Over time, though, the American picturesque began to formulate its own qualities, as Joseph Ketner and Michael Tammenga explain how “‘Picturesque’ essentially became synonymous with ‘varied’ or ‘diverse,’ a quality of interplay and contrast perceived in its purest form in the carpet of colors thrown over a landscape during autumn or a mixture of settled and wild landscape. A picturesque scene could incorporate aspects of nature that previous generations of British connoisseurs would have regarded as beautiful or sublime” (Ketner and Tammenga 36). Eventually the American picturesque became independent from its European counterpart, both aesthetically and politically.

The main difference between the American and British picturesque lay not in distinctions of artistic skill, or style, but within the very subject matter itself. For instance, many critics of the American picturesque claimed that the country was simply too young to be suitable for picturesque paintings, epitomized by the country’s lack of ancient ruins. In his 1835 “Essay on American Scenery,” Thomas Cole addressed this issue directly, offering a rebuttal “on what has been considered a grand defect in American scenery – the want of associations, such as arise amid the scenes of the old world” (Cole 35) by claiming that “American associations are not so much of the past as of the present and the future” (36). The nostalgia of the picturesque, for Cole, is replaced by anticipation. This idea of progress can be found, as literary scholar Rochelle Johnson claims in *Passions for Nature*, in the American tendency to eclipse the wild background with the domesticated middle and foreground, suggesting America’s inevitable taming of the wilderness, or shaping of the landscape, to suit the needs of an expanding nation. The wilderness

of the picturesque background – typically associated with the sublime – yields to American progress, continually receding to spaces beyond the conquerable frontier.

Within the United States, as Johnson notes, the natural landscape was in many respects considered boundless, subject to the expansive will of the American people. Within England, though, Ann Bermingham argues that the picturesque aesthetic of the late eighteenth century arose out of a much different relationship to the availability of land, “coincid[ing] with the accelerated enclosure of the English countryside” (Bermingham 1). Bermingham argues that these British landscape paintings were being “inscrib[ed with] the social values of industrialism” (6), signifying a period of time where increased agricultural capital and production corresponded to less available farmland for the middle-class. The resulting ideological work presents what Hanlon calls “a nostalgic semiotic that fantasized a rural laboring existence by and large falling away from English experience” (Hanlon 99). The “self-perpetuating process of industrialization” that Hanlon notes pervaded the countryside was “foreclosed in the imagery of the picturesque,” which made the picturesque increasingly attractive for its providing of “fantasies of worked and inhabited lands” that were in utter “denial of economic and social trends” (99).

But the artistic idealizing of “worked” lands was not the same as idealizing work, as the presence of laborers in the landscape presented a unique problem to theorists such as Price and Gilpin. On the one hand, Hanlon tells how the spread of mills across the Northern England countryside beginning in 1785 was “evacuating the landscapes picturesque aesthetes such as Gilpin idealized and theorized. The rustics they imagined were no longer at work in those landscapes—instead, they were entering the mills and moving to urban centers” (Hanlon 98-99). For the workers who remained, if they were depicted engaged in the act of laboring, cultivating the land, they were thereby hastening the erasure of the very wilderness the picturesque semiotic

sought to promote. Thus “the rustic types sometimes included in these works—farmers, shepherds, rural workers—presented problems for picturesque theorists like Gilpin, who regarded obviously cultivated land as potentially unpicturesque unless balanced against ‘wild’ nature” (Hanlon 98). If human laborers must be included, Gilpin tells, it is only acceptable to present them if they are not laboring or are seen at rest. “In a moral view,” Gilpin explains, “the industrious mechanic is a more pleasing object, than the loitering peasant. But in a picturesque light, it is otherwise. The arts of industry are rejected; and even idleness, if I may so speak, adds dignity to a character. Thus the lazy cowherd resting on his pole, or the peasant lolling on a rock, may be allowed in the grandest scenes; while the laborious mechanic, with his implements of labour, would be repulsed” (Gilpin, *Observations*, 44)

While parallels can certainly be drawn to the attraction of the picturesque for antebellum Northerners who were similarly witnessing the increasing spread of industrialism, the expansiveness of the land, as reinforced within American landscape paintings, framed industrialism’s spread as progress. American industrialization was not necessarily erasing agrarian spaces, for there were a seemingly infinite number of such spaces available. Thus, Johnson argues that the “‘picturesque’ aesthetic served as one of the main vehicles through which the particular metaphor for nature as progress was expressed” (R. Johnson 70), with the picturesque enabling a sense of control over that landscape. The control exhibited over nature was not to enclose lands, but to expand their usefulness, an exhibition of control that did not foreclose opportunity, but enabled national and economic progress. Indeed, as art historian Angela Miller argues, employment of the picturesque was less about the “moderating and uplifting function of art” within landscape paintings, or evidence of “cultural attitudes towards nature” (Miller 11), than it was about exhibiting and controlling a “specifically regional

definition of the American national ideal” (16). This rendition of the picturesque, Miller claims, was particular to the Northeast, demonstrating “an explicit commitment to a national ideal, and a covert and often invidious message of self-justification for an identifiably northern way of life” (6). Just as in England, the picturesque helped reconcile anxiety over industrial capitalism with nostalgia for a Northern way of life and labor.

However, the physical presence of the factory did not fit easily into picturesque renditions of the landscape. In England, it is perhaps in part because of the denial of industrialism that Bermingham and Hanlon locate at the aesthetic’s core that the factory was considered very unpicturesque. British picturesque theorist Uvedale Price, in his *Essays on the Picturesque*, claimed the factory to be the result of what an “œconomy had produced, what the greatest ingenuity, if a prize were given for ugliness, could not surpass” (Price, *Essays* I, 198). When American Northern artists did choose to represent factories within the picturesque mode, they often replaced the wild background for an image of the industrial center, the rustic laborers of the middle ground with scenes of domestic prosperity. This repositioning of industry within the landscape, framing the manufactory as the benefactor and civilizer of the Northern middle-ground, was instrumental in distinguishing the Northern landscape – increasingly populated by manufactories – from its Southern counterpart – plantations upheld by forced slave labor. For many people, David Zonderman explains, Lowell became such a place:

many operatives continued to see in Lowell that middle ground where industry, nature, and community could meet as distinct yet interrelated forces. . . they believed that the factory, the city, and the natural landscape could coexist, providing beneficial counterpoints to each other . . . The new buildings, and the new communities, did not rob workers of their rural heritage. They enhanced the bounty and beauty of nature, and gave new meaning to the ideals of communal work and life. (Zonderman 91)



In Day Kellogg Lee's *Merrimack: or, Life at the Loom* (1854), Lowell is described as "a landscape, so lessened by distance that a painter could almost have drawn it on his thumb-nail, and I never saw a more exquisite gem of beauty" (Lee, *Merrimack*, 78), and Lucy Larcom, in her 1875 memoir of factory life, *An Idyl of Work*, refers to "The picturesque beauty of the Merrimack" (Larcom viii). Although by presenting the factory as picturesque artists went against the conventional traditions of picturesque theory, the corporate manufacturers of the North saw in the picturesque opportunity to assuage cultural anxieties over industrialism by carving out a space wherein the factory could unify nostalgia for an agrarian past with the economic promise of an industrial future.

### ***Industrial Paternalism***

The small town of East Chelmsford, Massachusetts (what would later become better known as Lowell) was chosen by the Boston Associates (a group of prominent and influential businessmen) to be the site of a large-scale manufacturing operation for three reasons: the large amount of land available; the land's proximity to a large source of water power (the falls of the Merrimack River); and the ease of transportation for both people and goods through waterways. In 1822 construction of the mills began, and over the course of the antebellum era "the population spiraled, reaching 6,000 in 1830, 18,000 in 1836, and 33,000 in 1850. At that date Lowell was the leading textile center in the nation and the second largest city in Massachusetts" (Dublin 21). "The Spindle City" (as Lowell would come to be known) also had the added benefit of being located near a large and relatively untapped pool of laborers: rural New England women.

While those were the practical reasons that governed the location of the Lowell mills—reasons that similarly guided many other mill locations—Francis Cabot Lowell, one of Lowell’s original founders and prominent member of the Boston Associates, was also guided by more ethical considerations, particularly the vision of an urban center distinct from British industrial cities such as Manchester.<sup>30</sup> As Paul Shackel makes clear in *Culture Change and the New Technology* (his archaeological study of Harper’s Ferry), Lowell’s vision was implemented in the design of many industrial spaces. From early American pro-industrialists such as Alexander Hamilton and Trench Coxe, who “believed that factories should be located in rural areas” so as to create a “nonurban American industry [that] was meant to avoid the ills of European cities” (Shackel 87) to industrialists of the 1830s and 40s who “deliberately landscaped around factories to further the belief that machine could coexist harmoniously with nature” (87), manufacturers continually tried to separate the presence of the factory from the vices of urbanity. David Zonderman, building upon the work of Leo Marx, claims that this attempt for unity arose from both a desire to unify the machine with the garden within a middle ground as well as a belief that the factory’s proximity to Nature would help tame the disparaging blots on its reputation, such as the poor working and living conditions.

Desire for the separation of the factory from the city was initially to prevent the perceived vices and degradation that accompanied the factory towns of England—and urbanity more generally—such as crime, poverty, lack of religious faith, and sexual promiscuity, from the factory work available to Americans. This cultural association of factory-life with vice was especially threatening to the women employed within, evidenced by the paternalist rules and regulations that reacted to the imagined threats of urbanism. Having such a foil as British

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<sup>30</sup> Francis Lowell had first-hand experiences with British industry, having spent an extensive amount of time in Manchester.

Industry justified for the owners the paternalist structure of governance that textile manufactories exerted over their workforce. In Lowell, company regulations included the necessity of attending religious service once a week, one of many rules that company agents pointed out on recruiting missions to alleviate any parental concerns about factory life for their daughters (fig. 2.3).<sup>31</sup> Regulations for Boarding Houses at the Middlesex Company, a wool mill at Lowell, enforced a curfew and strict living conditions, in addition to the mandate of regularly attending worship. The enactment of these laws was in part “to make life in the factories respectable enough to attract the daughters of Puritan Yankee farmers,” ensuring women and their families that “working in the mills would neither corrupt the girls, nor debase them socially” (Coolidge 14). But the last regulation listed, that “all persons in the employ of the Middlesex Company should be vaccinated ... which will be done at the expense of the Company,” points to an aspect of care in the regulations, that governing rules should be enforced for the welfare and protection of the community. Factory owners set out from the start to ensure the factory system was a communal environment where one could find economic independence and moral development, safe from the influence of urbanization.<sup>32</sup>

The female employees did not always view such regulations as beneficial, drawing parallels between the paternalist control exhibited by such regulations and the condition of plantation laborers. For even if manufacturing companies enacted regulations to govern their employee’s moral well-being, many of these women were nonetheless leaving home for the first time, to a relatively new place (the industrial center) and under the employ of large companies.

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<sup>31</sup> William Phalen notes that “the mill’s recruiting agents traveling in the countryside would carry a copy of the mill’s regulations to assure parents that their daughter’s virtue would be protected in the factory town” (Phalen 128).

<sup>32</sup> Eventually the enforcement of these and other regulations did more to contribute to the mill’s association with vice and corruption. As Coolidge explains, many factories began using a “black list” system that prevented women from gaining further employment if “dishonorably discharged” from work, and thus female employees were “placed completely at the mercy of the overseers,” and “there was nothing in the Lowell system to prevent the overseers being what they later became, dishonest, petty tyrants” (Coolidge 133).

And though mill work certainly did promise “individual self-support” and provide women with other opportunities not available at their rural homes, Thomas Dublin explains that what made these conditions possible was that the “steady movement of the family farm from a subsistence to a commercial basis made daughters relatively ‘expendable’” (Dublin 40). Though texts such as *Fall River* — whose main protagonist mysteriously dies — showed just how “expendable” these women could be within the eyes of larger governing institutions, other texts routinely tried to assuage these concerns. Sarah Bagley, in an editorial for the *Lowell Offering*, declared,

Let no one suppose that the ‘factory girls’ are without guardian. We are placed in the care of overseers who feel under moral obligations to look after our interests; and, if we are sick, to acquaint themselves with our situation and wants; and, if need be, to remove us to the Hospital, where we are sure to have the best attendance, provided by the benevolence of our Agents and Superintendents. (Bagley 64)<sup>33</sup>

The main character of Charlotte Hilbourne’s *Effie and I; or, Seven Years in a Cotton Mill* (1863), opens up the narrative by declaring she will effectively disprove the notion that one would find at Lowell “those living tombs, those slave-palaces, and see the pale, shrinking, overtasked thousands toiling on, year after year, for the mere pittance to prolong a miserable existence”

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<sup>33</sup> The *Lowell Offering* ran from 1840-1845, under the editorship of Harriet F. Curtis and Harriet Farley, and Farley somewhat revived the publican under the title of the *New England Offering*, which ran from 1847-1850. Though the *Lowell Offering*’s original editor was the Reverend Abel C. Thomas, an associate of the manufacturing companies, in the preface to the first volume he asserts that “The articles are all written by factory-girls, and *we do not* revise or re-write them. We have taken less liberty with them than editors usually take with other than the most inexperienced writers” (qtd. in Robinson 114). Even so, scholars continue to debate the level of influence the manufacturing corporations held over the periodical. Benita Eisler tells how “With the assumption of editorial duties in 1842, Harriet Farley moved with her coeditor from a corporation boardinghouse to a ‘rose-covered cottage’ on the edge of town. Evidence also suggests that her straitened family received occasional, if discreet, assistance from one of the mill owners, Abbot Lawrence” (Eisler 38) and that “There were still more serious accusations directed at the *Offering*: overseers collected subscriptions and supervised deliveries. Agents allegedly purchased a thousand dollars’ worth of back issues, thereby ‘laundering’ Corporation subsidy, without which the magazine would not have limped through its final year” (Eisler 38). Additionally, the *Lowell Offering* published relatively few articles that were critical of the factory, which Eisler attributes to the *Offering*’s avowedly “literary nature.” Nonetheless, this would prompt one of the main contentions between Farley and Bagley.

(Hilbourne 5).<sup>34</sup> Given the actual employment of men titled “overseers” within the mills, in combination with the low wages and living conditions inside the boarding houses that accompanied many manufactories, which Dublin says served as another “instrument of social control” (Dublin 77), it was not difficult to draw parallels between the women employed in the Northern mills and the slaves who worked Southern fields.<sup>35</sup>

Comparisons to slavery were unfavorable for laborers and corporations alike. Especially for the female workers, the comparison meant, as Orestes Brownson put it in “The Laboring Classes” (1840), an editorial published in the *Boston Quarterly Review*, that they had “all the disadvantages of freedom and none of its blessings” (Brownson 10). Any semblance of prosperity, Brownson claimed, was only a façade, “exhibited to distinguished visitors” who did not see the “dark side [of the factory], moral as well as physical” (11). Within this other, “dark” version of the factory, “the great mass [of female employees] wear out their health, spirits, and morals, without becoming one whit better off than when they commenced labor,” eventually leaving the factory only to “go home and die” (11).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Laura Hapke calls Hilbourne “a nostalgic mill novelist” who was “repudiating the Lowell school’s standard denouements by sending her heroine back to that venue from a bad marriage” (Hapke 76).

<sup>35</sup> It is important to note that the mills initially paid relatively well, as John Coolidge tells: “In 1845 the average mill girl was said to be earning \$3.15 weekly, or \$1.90 more than her bare living expenses. These were certainly better wages than women received in any other occupation. The standard pay for domestic servants was \$.75 a week, and seamstresses received even less” (Coolidge 129). As time went on, though, Eisler notes that “conditions in both the mills and boardinghouses were steadily deteriorating” (Eisler 26-28), capitulating in the Ten Hour Movement of the 1840s. Criticism of living conditions tended to focus on “poor ventilation, exacerbated by overcrowding,” lack of privacy, and the presence of “dirt and ‘vermin’ in the bedrooms” (25-26). Within the factory, these conditions were much worse, “where the air was polluted with flying lint and fumes from whale-oil lamps that hung on pegs from each loom. Moreover, to maintain the humidity required to keep threads from breaking, the air had to be sprayed regularly with water and the windows nailed shut. Such an atmosphere undoubtedly aggravated the vulnerability of lungs exposed everywhere to tuberculosis” (28).

<sup>36</sup> An anonymous response to Brownson published in the *Lowell Offering* countered that if Brownson believed that to be true, then New England women “must be a set of worthy and virtuous idiots, for no virtuous girl of common sense would choose for an occupation one that would consign her to infamy” (“Factory Girls” 188).

Threats of ruined domesticity, and the paternalist control manufactories had over women, enflamed comparisons between wage and slave labor. As often depicted in the labor songs printed in labor presses and broadsides this comparison typically turns upon a redirected feeling of sympathy, redirecting benevolence for the slave to benevolence for the oppressed wage laborer.<sup>37</sup> The critique is dramatized in sentimental fashion in the anonymous “The Factory Girl” (1834):

That night a chariot passed her,  
While on the ground she lay;  
The daughters of her master  
An evening visit pay—  
Their tender hearts were sighing,  
As negroes’ wrongs were told;  
While the white slave was dying,  
Who gained their father’s gold. (“The Factory Girl” 43)

The extent of the white slave’s oppression is made clear by the passing chariot, conveying the ignorant “daughters of her master.” For “The Factory Girl,” sympathy for slaves is presented as particular to the privileged, non-laboring classes, the irony being that such sympathy ignores the wage slavery that enables such a privileged position. For this untitled song published by the Factory Girls Association in 1836 though, the threat turns upon injury to labor republicanism:

Oh! Isn’t it a pity that such a pretty girl as I  
Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die?  
Oh! I cannot be a slave;  
I will not be a slave,  
For I’m so fond of liberty  
That I cannot be a slave. (Factory Girls Association 45)

This anonymous song, which Philip Foner notes was sung by “fifteen hundred factory girls” of the Factory Girls Association during their 1836 strike against wage cuts, collapses the distinction

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<sup>37</sup> Though categorized as songs, Philip Foner tells that “There is no way of knowing just how many of the songs written for the labor press were actually sung. The chances are that many never got off the printed page and entered oral tradition. But from evidence in reports of meetings, conventions, strikes, and political demonstrations, enough did to warrant the conclusion that a fairly large number were sung by the workers of the time” (P. Foner xiv).

between Southern and Northern slaves, positing slavery as an economic condition shared by oppressed laborers. “The Laborer’s Lament” (1845), though, would follow a strand of argument similar to that used by Orestes Brownson. Written by the pseudonym of “Dreamer,” the song tells of the slave’s favorable status over the wage laborer:

O cruel—most cruel!—the laborer sigh’d,  
The fate of the African slave.  
Who crouches in silence his master beside,  
From infancy down to his grave.  
But tho’ he is fetter’d, and forced to resign,  
His right to the pleasures of earth,  
The state of that captive is nobler than mine,  
For want never visits his hearth. (Dreamer 50)

Songs such as these critiqued abolitionist societies for their benevolence towards southern, rather than northern, slavery. Slavery is cruel, the song asserts, but at least slaves have a hearth for which the paternal master provides.

The three songs emphasize factory women’s changing relations to domesticity. In the first song, the speaker possesses “a hearth” unfulfilled; in the second, she is denied benevolent ties of sisterhood and care; and in the third, she is sentenced to die enslaved and alone. Such comparisons point to both the increased role and presence of women within the workforce and the main critique of industrialism’s negative impact upon the lives of young women. This critique would provide the foundation for how Northern industrialism actively sought to differentiate itself from Southern slavery.

In order to assuage concerns over the laboring and living conditions of the women who occupied industrial spaces, manufactories used picturesque renditions of factory life to show that the mill operatives did not so much exhibit control over the women themselves, but redirected that control to the spaces in which they lived and worked so as to create a more pleasing and

conducive middle-ground. Mill girls could not be viewed as “wage slaves” if they occupied a space conducive to domestic values and pursuits.

Thus, in order for textile manufactories to bring their work sites more in line with the values of an agrarian republic, to provide a safe and controlled space in which their workers would develop economically and socially, factories attempted to create a middle ground in which to operate, forming a unity, in Leo Marx’s words, between the machine and the garden. Or, as the problem pronounced itself for textile factories: “The central issue regarding these new structures [factory buildings] was how to reconcile them with images and ideals of nature and community” (Zonderman 14). This consciousness of a constructed middle ground often manifested itself, according to Shackel, through the increased construction of “green lawns,” “trees along pathways and canals,” and an increase in the planting of “flower beds” within industrial spaces (Shackel 87). “This new ideology,” Shackel continues, “served as a mechanism to ensure profit as well as to extend corporate influence into the domestic, religious, and educational realms of the workers’ lives. Many communities were deliberately planned by industrial capitalists who standardized the behavior of workers in the home as well as in the factory” (106). For Zonderman and Shackel, this “middle ground” is a physical space within the landscape where manufacturers exert their control. Within artistic renderings of that space, though, the middle-ground is always imaginative, a space artistically crafted to unify the conflicting messages of the background and foreground.

Constructing the middle-ground was one thing, but presenting that space as harmonized with nature, as picturesque, was a bit more difficult. As Gilpin tells, a picturesque scene necessitates expressions of what he calls “roughness,” depictions of the continual struggle between nature and man. Not only were these expressions of wildness instrumental to the



picturesque, but they also could themselves be manufactured: “Turn the lawn into a piece of broken ground: plant rugged oaks instead of flowering shrubs: break the edges of the walk: give it the rudeness of a road; mark it with wheel-tracks; and scatter around a few stones, and brushwood; in a word, instead of making the whole *smooth*, make it *rough*; and you make it also *picturesque*” (Gilpin, *Three*, 8). The concept of “roughness” held a particular appeal to \

Southerners like John Pendleton Kennedy, who emphasized the “savage” and “unruly” nature of the slave upon the plantation as a way to frame the picturesque nature of the space, empowering the paternalist control exerted by the planter. But the Northern manufacturers could not exert the same sort of control over their own wage laborers – labeling the factory women as savage or unruly would do little to minimize comparisons between wage and slave labor. The manufactory still asserted control, choosing instead to assert it over wild nature itself, an expression brought about, Bridget Heneghan claims, from the increased associations of aspects of Northern life with Southern slavery, eliciting in the Northeast “a choice towards civilization compared to the savage slave, a unified democracy of white people, and control over nature as well as those who labored in it” (Heneghan xiv). Northern manufacturers used the picturesque mode to distinguish the ways that Southern planters and Northern manufacturers asserted control over the middle-ground spaces of their respective landscapes.

### ***Controlling the Middle Ground***

Although figures 2.4 and 2.5 are from two very different parts of the country, a cotton plantation (fig. 2.4) within the Mississippi Valley and the manufactories of Lowell, Massachusetts (fig. 2.5), and show two different economic systems, plantation slave labor and industrial wage labor, they both borrow from the picturesque mode in order to position their

views toward capitalism.<sup>38</sup> Both views are granted from an overlooking, privileged perspective, and both contain three distinct areas: a foreground that frames the scene, showing both human occupants and a calm body of water; a populated middle ground showing signs of habitation (the left showing houses and the right showing factories); and a receding horizon marked by an expansive sky. Whereas the left image uses the presence of slave laborers to demonstrate the wealth and power of the plantation owner, the right presents figures in the foreground who, rather than laboring, simply “adorn” the scene, as Gilpin would say, figures unaffected by the picturesque quality of the surrounding landscape.<sup>39</sup>

Within Lewis’s depiction of the plantation economy, the picturesque becomes a way to showcase the profit elicited from control over both the labor and bodies of those persons appearing in the landscape. Conversely, in Merrill’s representation of the industrial economy, control is exerted not over laborers themselves, but over the space in which they labor, the village nestled within the hills. In order to establish their distance from Southern plantations, Northern manufactories used the picturesque to highlight the differences between slave and industrial labor. While the Southern planter in the left image exerts direct control over the slave laborers, the Northern manufactories would seem to leave the laborers to do as they please, seeking instead to better promote the promise and availability of economic and moral development. Similar to the young woman who appeared on the cover of the 1845 *Lowell Offering*, the women in the right image are seemingly able to move between Nature and the factory, two distinct and separate portions of the landscape.

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<sup>38</sup> John Vlach notes that “A Cotton Plantation” was part of Henry Lewis’s “moving panorama,” meant to capitalize upon public interest in the “slave-owning estates [that] had become so emblematic of the South” (Vlach 25). *Statistics of Lowell*, a wood engraving, was likely a piece of promotional material, as it includes some fiscal statistics.

<sup>39</sup> “At the same time, we must observe, that figures, which thus take their importance merely from not mixing with low, mechanic arts, are at best only *picturesque appendages*. They are of a negative nature, neither adding to the grandeur of the idea, nor taking from it. They merely and simply *adorn* a scene” (Gilpin, *Observations*, 45).

Clearly, the aesthetics of control elicited by the picturesque appealed differently to Southerners and Northerners. Within the context of the plantation, the picturesque demonstrates what Christopher Hanlon calls a cultural orientation towards the socioeconomics of slave labor. For Hanlon, Southern usage of the picturesque, such as appears in John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1853), fit "the project of idealizing social economies of human bondage" (Hanlon 101).<sup>40</sup> Here is one such picturesque depiction of plantation life in *Swallow Barn* that Hanlon discusses:

A few hundred steps from the mansion, a brook glides at a snail's pace towards the river, holding its course through a wilderness of laurel and alder, and creeping around islets covered with green mosses. Across this stream is thrown a rough bridge, which it would delight a painter to see . . . On the grass which skirts the margin of the spring, I observe the family linen is usually spread out by some three or four negro women, who chant shrill music over their wash-tubs, and seem to live in ceaseless warfare with sundry little besmirched and bow-legged blacks, who are never tired of making somersets, and mischievously pushing each other onto the clothes laid down to dry. (Kennedy 29)

The slave women and their children are representative of the rustic laborer employed in English picturesque paintings, nostalgic for "a rural laboring existence by and large falling away" (Hanlon 99). In Hanlon's reading, Kennedy redirects the ethical judgment of Littleton, a Northerner, upon the scene into sympathetic nostalgia for a fading culture: "The conservative semiotics of the picturesque gaze—traditionally serving to anesthetize the ethical responsiveness of otherwise sympathetic viewers to what would otherwise constitute obvious horrors of deprivation and poverty—are here arrayed in apology for the system of human chattel itself, but only in the form of a passing glance at a pastoral idyll" (113).

The momentary nature of Littleton's "passing glance" is elicited by the way in which Hazard has constructed the space, and in which Kennedy frames the scene. Indeed, the images

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<sup>40</sup> I use the 1853 revised edition of *Swallow Barn*, though it was first published in 1832. The second edition contains slightly altered landscape representations from the former. For more on the differences between the two editions, see Hanlon, esp. 108-113.

that bookend this picturesque scene, the figure of the mansion and the “mischievous” slave children, imbue the scene with an emphasis on domestic politics. Littleton’s commentary and judgment upon the scene – as well as his tempered view of slavery for much of the novel – is reined in by his inability to recognize how his positional gaze implicates him in the governing paternalism of the plantation. Put differently, while Littleton’s idealization of slave labor provokes nostalgia, the longing for the past is contorted into a longing for the familial love of the Hazards, the paternal figures who govern the scene. The middle-ground is here framed as an extension of the Hazard’s domestic reach, rather than a separate sphere; there are several maternal figures with children in the scene, but no paternal figures, and the laborers are airing the Hazard laundry, a domestic task consistently threatened by the unruly mischief that would occur if the scene were vacated of a sense of order. The control over the middle-ground here arises from the paternalism of the plantation, the gaze granted from the privileged position of Hazard’s mansion, a position Littleton longs for and endeavors to occupy himself throughout the novel.

The middle-ground necessitates control in this scene, ostensibly, because of the threat of unruly nature, a mask for the perceived threat of uncontrolled slaves, whom Littleton describes “as essentially parasitical in [their] nature” (Kennedy 453). The loss of such control would have much more significant implications than the loss of Hazard’s linens, undermining the system of Southern slave-based capitalism. The picturesque aesthetic is here informed by control not merely over unruly nature (the “mischievous” children as well as the landscape), but also the paternalism that enables such control.

This idealization of slavery and paternalist control to rationalize an economic system is similarly present in the *Proof Vignette of Southern Planter and Scenes from the South* (ca. 1860) (fig. 2.6). Here, it is the paternalist gaze that ensures the prosperity of Southern capitalism,

thereby rationalizing chattel slavery. In the foreground is a man, representing the Southern gentleman, sitting on a bale of cotton next to an enormous sprig of cotton, complete with three giant bolls. These foreground figures overshadow the representation of industry in the left middle-ground, the man and cotton-boll occluding vision of the factory. The unobscured imagery of the right middle-ground, where the slaves labor in the cotton field, is placed under the watchful eye of the Southerner, resonant of the plantation. In the background is a steamboat, depicting commerce as the scene's ultimate end.

The Southern planter in the center divides the two predominant forms of labor in antebellum America. On his left is the factory, and on his right a cotton field full of laboring slaves. Both the cotton boll and the Southerner overshadow the factory and by extension the significance of Northern industry. The curvature of the oversized cotton sprig to the right directs the gaze away from the factory and towards the right half of the image, in line with the planter's gaze, where he is presented in a more scaled perspective. Both representations of the Southern economy in the foreground direct the viewer away from industry and towards agriculture. From his spot on the hill, the Southerner overlooks his field-slaves, leisurely enjoying a cigar while the slaves gather the cotton. In the right half of the image, the gaze is directed towards the background image of the steamboat, signifying the commercial destination of cotton far beyond the plantation. Emphasizing the sectional connection between Northern and Southern capitalism, *Proof* orients the South's economic progress toward commercial trade rather than industry. Through the increased control over labor – the Southerner's larger-than-life size and gaze – commercial profits are both maximized and bountiful, signified in the monstrous size of the cotton boll. It is the Southern planter, *Proof* imagines, who controls the nation's economies.

In these Southern renditions of the picturesque, it is the supposed “roughness” of the slave’s nature that makes the image picturesque; controlling this aspect of unruly nature is what provides economic prosperity. By asserting direct control over the laborers themselves, Kennedy and *Proof* not only aestheticize the profitability of slavery, but also ensure the continued existence of the agrarian state the picturesque so often idealized. Within the North, rather than trying to return to agrarianism, manufactories used the picturesque to posit the factory as a space that unified the values of agrarianism with the promise of industrialism’s profitability. By controlling the spaces laborers operated in, rather than the laborers themselves, manufactories used the picturesque to unify the factory and the landscape, emphasizing the economic and ethical distance between the Northern factory and the Southern plantation.

### ***The Picturesque Manufactory***

In Emerson’s “The Poet,” the Poet plays the unique role of always bringing a privileged perspective to the scene at hand. Whether by surveying the land, much like the transparent eyeball of *Nature*, or surveying an artistic work, the Poet is tasked with holding discordant images and thoughts within a unifying narrative: “Readers of poetry see the factory-village, and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the bee-hive, or the spider’s geometrical web” (Emerson, “Poet,” 455). Through the process of consecrating modernity with the “poetry of the landscape,” the Poet is likened to the landscape artist, who similarly unifies the sublimity of Nature with human progress. For the Poet, the “factory-village, and the railway” are not intrusions into the landscape, but rather part of Nature’s “great Order,” in need of the Poet’s unifying vision. Not only does this unity sanctify

the factory village's position with the landscape, but it renders the scene meaningful to the general public, the readers who look on the presence of modernity as problematic.

This Poetic gaze, able to unify conflicting and contradictory elements, is closely aligned not only with the picturesque, but also with the architects responsible for designing the buildings newly populating the landscape. In volume two of his *Essays on the Picturesque*, Price responds to a letter that “insists very much on the necessity of uniting the mind of the painter with that of the poet” by saying “it is no less necessary, and more literally so, that the architect of buildings in the country should be *architetto-pittore*, for indeed he ought not only to have the mind, but the hand of the painter; not only to be acquainted with the principles, but as far as design goes, with the practice of landscape painting” (Price, *Essays* II, 173-174). Eventually, this combined knowledge of poetry, architecture, and the picturesque would have practical effects upon the physical landscape. Much as Gilpin instructed purveyors of the picturesque to mark up the landscape so as to render it more picturesque, Price claims that the architect, utilizing his unique skill,

would comply with his own, still more than with an improved public taste, in sacrificing something of the little exclusive vanity of his own particular profession, to the laudable ambition of uniting what never should be separated; and, far from removing trees, which though they might conceal parts of his works, gave much more effect to the whole, would wish, and would direct, such trees to be planted. (Price 178)

Of the utmost importance to both Emerson's Poet and Price's architect is unity between buildings and the landscape. This was the same sort of unity manufactories sought to capture through the picturesque.

The image of the Wakefield Manufacturing Company (fig. 2.7) offers such a union between the factory and landscape. Though museum curator Edwin Wolf affirms that Smith's chromolithograph is “an accurate representation of the Fisher Family's Wakefield Mills,” the

natural site itself having “presented so picturesque an appearance that visitors likened it to the English countryside at its best” (Wolf 62n32), Smith nonetheless utilizes elements of the picturesque to enhance the painting. The mill itself, located in the left middle-ground, appears to be a part of the natural landscape, viewed from a raised, privileged perspective. For the most part, the factory is seen rising unadorned out of the middle-ground, similar to a rocky outcropping arising from the meadow. The colors of the mill are similar to the earthy tones of the natural ground in the left and middle. Aside from a few houses whose view is further obscured by trees, the mill is surrounded before and behind by expanses of open nature: the large field and copse of trees behind the mill.

*Wakefield* attempts to integrate the factory into the landscape. Despite its industrial production, the manufactory is in harmony with Nature, rather than disruptive and damaging to the surrounding countryside. Similar to the role of the rustic worker in the middle-ground, the factory balances nostalgia for the agrarianism of the past and an appreciation for the emergent modern industrial era. This smooth transition is represented by the earthy representation of the factory itself, a depiction similar to the ways that landscape artists sought to “improve” the scene. According to Johnson, this improvement of the landscape, or the depiction of it in more picturesque ways, conveyed a certain “understanding of American progress” (R. Johnson 68). The middle-ground, which would have formerly been devoted to agrarian pursuits, here contains those endeavors within a small portion of the landscape, both containing and maximizing labor productivity while simultaneously representing such labor as a natural outgrowth of the land.

This rendition of industrial labor still presents a certain understanding of American progress, but it is, as Miller reminds us, a regionally specific understanding. Within the Northeast, the possibility of expanding agriculturalist endeavors to the middle ground was no



longer much of a possibility by the 1840s. The conquerable wilderness of the background was retreating further and further from the middle ground as the frontier was pushed further west. Taking advantage of the vacated middle ground, utilizing it for a class of rural workers increasingly unemployed, meant industrial expansion. *Wakefield* represents how such expansion could be done in a way that honors the region's agrarian past and industrial future, containing industrial labor while retaining reverence for Nature and the landscape.

While such a characterization of industry is informed by a socioeconomic concern that accompanied the growth and spread of industrialism into what was once idyllic farmland, *Wakefield* carefully partitions the factory into one contained space within the middle ground, devoting representations of other buildings and people to domestic purposes. Sanctifying Wakefield's industrial space within a portion of the middle ground leaves the other spaces and persons open to domestic pursuits: picnics, conversations, and otherwise unmediated interactions with nature. Indeed, *Wakefield* actively works to combat the cultural criticism often levied against women employed in industrial settings, especially textile manufactories, that employment within the factory lessened opportunities for social and domestic bliss. Apart from the family in the foreground picnicking (a common trope in picturesque paintings), within the middle ground, opposite the factory to the right of the open field, various people leisurely enjoy the day. There are two separate groups of children playing, two children being supervised by two adults, a woman and child, a man and a woman in conversation, and a man strolling up the road. By emphasizing the presence of such sites of community, rather than their feared erasure, *Wakefield* controls industrialism's influence upon the landscape.

By emphasizing the domestic prosperity of its laborers, *Wakefield* performs the cultural work of Northern sectionalism regarding views of labor, that it elicits both moral and economic

prosperity. Miller's reading of picturesque paintings that avow a Northernist position stems from two key facts about Northern landscape paintings, that "New England farm scenes . . . cannot be understood apart from the sectional polemic concerning free labor and slavery that was being waged in the 1850s" (Miller 13) and that these scenes "were less often directed outward toward the object—nature—than inward and back toward the social subject" (11-12). For Miller the landscape paintings coming out of the Northeast in the 1840s and 1850s were increasingly affected by sectional tensions (especially economic tensions), which preempted Northern depictions of landscape that "schooled Americans in moral and civic behavior" (13).

In the artistic rendering of Wakefield, the manufactory as well as factory labor are depicted as natural parts of the human life-cycle, part of a life's trajectory that includes having children and contributing to the family's prosperity. While such scenes of domestic prosperity as that expressed in *Wakefield* convey a sectional orientation towards economic progress and an idealization of domestic values, this orientation was sectional precisely because it was in economic and ethical contrast to the main capitalist machine of the South: slavery. Indeed, the non-laboring families that populate the middle-ground of images like *Wakefield* and many other representations of Northern industrial sites are a stark contrast to the laboring slaves on and off the Southern plantation.

To present the industrial site as one wherein women had the capacity for leisure and familial growth meant exhibiting more direct control over the presence of Nature. As seen in the *View of the Boott Cotton Mill at Lowell, Mass.* (fig. 2.8), increasing control over Nature allows for industry to preserve a space for the benefit of its employees. In doing so, *View of the Boott* still conveys a particularly Northern notion of economic progress, as the gaze is drawn toward the central figure in the background, the Boott Cotton Mill, an important business within the

Lowell group of manufacturers. The path to achieving this sort of economic progress is not as dependent on labor as it is upon the treatment of the laborers. Because portraying the women working would invite the comparison to slave laborers, the image instead shows them strolling about, gathering together in the courtyard of the mill, a new town square. The smoke rising from the manufactory suggests that it is in operation, showing that personal leisure and happiness are not foreclosed by industrial labor.

Certainly, *View of the Boott* is quite different from landscape art more closely aligned with the picturesque such as *Wakefield*. Nevertheless, the picturesque mode equally informs this depiction of one of Lowell's premier manufacturing plants. The middle-ground located between the street and the manufactory is a site of communal prosperity, made possible only by the control that the manufactory exerts over nature. Indeed, the planted trees are seen in an enclosed and controlled area, each of them at near ninety degree angles and in near uniform appearance, a contrast to the lively figures dressed in different colors and engaged in different activities. *View of the Boott* presents a fully formed middle-ground, made possible through the governance the manufactory exerts over unruly nature.

While Kennedy and *Proof Vignette* aestheticized the control that Southerners exhibited over laborers so as to maintain the system of Southern capitalism, *Merrimack Mills and Boarding-Houses* (fig. 2.9), an engraving of the Lowell Mill purposed for the *New England Offering*, uses the picturesque to harness this sense of control, redirected toward the natural world. Within Lowell, *Merrimack Mills* shows, it is not the laborers who are unruly, but nature itself; through further control of nature, both the laborers and industry benefit. Indeed, everything about this image shows control over nature. The trees are neatly trimmed and manicured, the ones on the left appearing with protective coverings around the trunks. The presence of the

Merrimack River, located off page, is eclipsed by the canal-like street. Everything in the engraving points toward the corporation's ability to control nature. The natural thoroughfare of the river is replaced by the road, showing the factory's ability to improve upon nature. Rather than being dismissive of nature's sublime power, the scene presents nature and industry as harmonious: industry replicates nature through its creation of the road, and nature mirrors industry by exhibiting an increased sense of order.

The control over nature the scene exhibits equally governs the people within. Apart from the people contained within the boundaries of the road, there appear no solitary figures in the scene. The remaining eighteen figures are presented in various social groups: a man and woman paired; a woman and child; and a man, woman, and child. By separating the domestic figures to either end of the road, *Merrimack Mills* shows that the industrial site is able to control and contain labor within a small portion of the industrial landscape. As the eye follows the three distinct rows of human figures in the scene, each line finds its terminus at the Merrimack Print, the industrial center occupying the background. Each of the axes of vision is presented as equally influential to the overall success of the factory, both aesthetically and commercially. By exhibiting the control it does, *Merrimack Mills* is able to allow for the simultaneous development and prosperity of nature, domesticity, and industry.

The nostalgia in these images is not as much for agrarianism as it is for the domestic hearth that accompanied the rural farmstead, which in the years after 1837 was becoming increasingly emptied and moved westward. Industrial work, as presented in these images, shows how the land can be harnessed so as to provide both labor and the promise of community for any who seek it, to reinvigorate the republican virtue inherent to the middle-ground. Presenting industrial spaces in this way lauds the cultural work of the picturesque, extolling its ability to

alter the relationship between industrialism and nature; however, as texts such as Catherine Williams's *Fall River* and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's "The Tenth of January" show, this usage of the picturesque also had a way of deflecting blame for any wrong-doing from the corporate manufactories.

### *The Cost of a Unified Landscape*

In the opening chapter of *Fall River* (1834), Williams presents the industrial town of Fall River as out of place, somewhat of an anomaly within an otherwise picturesque scene.<sup>41</sup>

"Situated on a rather abrupt elevation of land rising from the northeast side of Mount Hope bay," Williams illustrates,

stands the beautiful and flourishing village of Fall River, so called from the river, which taking its rise about four miles east, runs through the place, and after many a fantastic turn, is hurried to the bay over beds of rocks, where, before the scene was marred by the hand of cultivation and improvement, it formed several beautiful cascades and had a fine and imposing effect. The village is now only picturesque from the variety of delightful landscape by which it is surrounded, the back ground presenting a variety in rural scenery, where neat farms and fertile fields shew themselves here and there, between hill and dale and rock and wood. The soil, though for the most part fertile, is in some places exceedingly rocky, and often in the midst of such places some little verdant spot shews itself, looking, as Cunningham says, 'as tho' it were wrested from the hand of nature.' (Williams 9)

While this opening description certainly helps set the scene for the ensuing narrative, particular words and phrases Williams uses entwine the text's ensuing murder narrative with the language of the picturesque. By using the picturesque to frame not only the scene, but also the text itself,

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<sup>41</sup> *Fall River*, a unique combination of investigative journalism and historical fiction, details the murder of a mill girl, Sally Maria Cornell, suggesting – through the use of mounting evidence – the perpetrator of the crime to be a Methodist minister, E.K. Avery. Moving from an imagined recounting of the thoughts and actions of Cornell right before her murder, through details of Cornell's murder trial, and an exploration of the backgrounds of both Cornell and Avery and their associations with various textile manufactories and towns, the text combines narrative, interviews, testimony and letters to detail the life and death of Cornell. Though Williams is quick to rule out the possibility of suicide, the historical record never did. The best case against suicide was the finding of a signed note written shortly before her death, instructing: "If I am missing enquire of the Rev E.K. Avery" (Williams 31).

Williams imbues the murder of Sally Maria Cornell with the cultural politics of the landscape. The position Fall River occupies within the landscape would once have been considered picturesque, but it is now “marred by the hand of cultivation and improvement.” Though the words “cultivation and improvement” allude to the changes farming and industry have brought to the town, much of the murder mystery which follows, as well as the evidence Williams presents as instrumental in determining the guilt of E.K. Avery (the main suspect), turns upon various employments of the word “hand.” Cornell, much like the landscape itself, is marred by an invisible hand that promises prosperity yet brings only destruction, both falling victim to the town’s industrial transition.

The extended focus upon “hands” throughout the text serves as a way to highlight the various cultural, moral, and economic failings that contribute to Cornell’s murder. And it is this presentation of the corrupt hand that most strongly contributes to the town’s dissonant perception within an otherwise picturesque landscape. Though Williams asserts the town has been “marred by the hand of cultivation and improvement” (Williams 9), we see little evidence throughout the novel of industry’s contribution to this marring. In such a light, it is not industry that disrupts the picturesque scene with which the novel is framed, but the immoral actions of the town’s Methodist church, which becomes a scapegoat for the failures of industrialism’s promise. Balancing elements of sin and moral depravity, the representation of the town refuses to be aestheticized within an otherwise “delightful landscape” (9). The lack of a fully-formed middle-ground enables the various “hands” of the text to become sources of violence and control, symbols of the violence that threatens female laborers who are subject to forces that exist outside of an otherwise picturesque space.

Even though in the real account the minister's hand was never linked to Cornell's death, Williams presents throughout the text a number of unknown hands exerting their will over Cornell. From the initial discovery of Cornell's deceased body, where the suspicion "that she had died otherwise than by her own hand never entered the heads of either of the good women" (Williams 29-30) who discovered her, to when they examine her body and find "Just above each hip were marks of hands" (30), Williams sets out to prove it was Avery's hand that marred Cornell's body. Beyond this, there is the question of whose "hand" the letters found with Cornell were written in (154-155). Apart from the question of whether or not it was the minister's "large hand" that had marked Cornell, Williams tells that perhaps the most controversial part of the trial was that insufficient attention had been paid to injuries found upon Avery's hand. "It is almost equally strange," Williams laments,

so little should have been said respecting the wounded hand of the prisoner. At the time of the murder a woman in the vicinity of the place, dreamed that the murdered girl appeared to her and told her that the person who killed her, might be recognized by the marks of her teeth upon his hand, for that during the struggle . . . she bit it. . . . at the Bristol examination the prisoner was ordered to unglove. He had kept one glove on, previous to this. He pulled off his glove and his hand was found to be wounded. (157)

After Avery offers to explain how he received the wound, "He was silenced by the government counsel, who did not wish to hear *his story*. And thus the affair of the wounded hand was dropped" (157). In David Kasserman's book-length study of the trial, he makes no mention of this incident. However, the failure to discuss the physical "hand" within the trial reinforces the cultural connotations the "hand" takes on within Williams's book, not just as a physical instrument of murder, but as an unknowable force that exerts its will unopposed by its victims.

*Fall River* warns about what happens when a proper middle-ground fails to be established in the landscape, showing Cornell as occupying a space wherein not only laborers bodies are

expendable, but also no justice is meted out for the violence inflicted against them, much like the Southern slave. Indeed, the improper middle ground Cornell operates within draws on the fears of Northern industrial capitalism: Cornell is impregnated out of wedlock and her moral growth is seen as stymied; the itinerant nature of her job prevents her from establishing domestic stability; and she is unable to procure any real monetary benefits. Cornell's life and death seem eerily similar to the conditions inherent to both British manufactories and Southern plantations. The pull between industry and nature that the picturesque tries to control is here shown manifest within the bodies of the women who occupy that space, victim to the region's transition from agrarian to industrial capitalism. In many ways, *Fall River* serves as a warning of the various hardships and problems facing young women employed in the factory system.

But Williams falls short of laying the blame for Cornell's death upon the factory system, asserting that despite being a good person, Cornell fell into the *wrong* kind of life. Kasserman similarly faults Williams for downplaying the responsibility of the manufactory, relating how in the historical record the factory system was just as much on trial as was Methodism, as Cornell's death "contradicted the assertion of industrial capitalists that the women on whom they depended for labor were as safe in mill towns as they were at home" (Kasserman 2). Though I agree with Kasserman's argument, the details of Cornell's moral character do provide a more nuanced critique of her relationship to factory work. Characteristics of factory life that were routinely touted for their supposed benefit to young women — such as the work's temporary nature, profitability compared to other opportunities available, and the capacity for moral development — are each shown as failing Cornell, leading to her eventual demise. Cornell's various employments are unwillingly terminated, forcing her to relocate several times, she makes so little



money that she is caught stealing from a store, and her religion is Methodist.<sup>42</sup> While for Cornell Methodism represents a stable sense of community that she can rely upon as she moves from town to town, for Williams it is Methodism, not the factory, that represents the source of all the wrongs inflicted upon Cornell. Rather than providing a safe space for economic and moral growth, the factory continually provides the referential points for Cornell's wayward life.

And yet it is also clear that Cornell has no alternative life or happy hearth to which she can return. At various points she is estranged from her family as well as expelled from different boarding houses. This lack of a hearth is largely due to her troubles after having been caught for minor theft at a store, after which various bits of gossip contribute to the loss of her reputation. Despite what Williams portrays as an amiable character, combined with her satisfactory labor, the rumor that "*she had been talked about*" (Williams 80) follows her from town to town, proving the cause for dismissal from various occupations and living quarters, a point that Kasserman says was key for Avery's defense at the murder trial.<sup>43</sup> As Williams sees it, not only does Cornell continue to pay penance for one mistake (which had been almost immediately remedied), but also she exposes class dynamics existing within factory life: "It does not in the general way require much to set rich relations against poor ones—but here was ample room for

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<sup>42</sup> Cornell paints Methodism in a negative light, pinning much of the responsibility for both Cornell's death and Avery's acquittal upon the religious institution, calling their camp-meetings "a great evil, a sore affliction in the land, a pestilence walking in darkness, an enormity that calls loudly for the strong arm of the law" (Williams 164). For more on Avery's status within and relationship to the Methodist church, see Kasserman 75-98.

<sup>43</sup> Kasserman argues that Williams's characterization of Cornell is in conflict with "Sarah's letters (published in Williams's book) and testimony given at Avery's trial" (Kasserman 32). From his historical study, Kasserman makes the case that Cornell was more likely a prostitute, which explains the gossip about her moral standing that follows her from town to town. As Kasserman continues, Cornell's reputation was a key point that Avery's defense emphasized, but which Williams downplayed: "In the light of Avery's trial, in which the defense sought to demonstrate that Sarah was a hardened sexual criminal, Catherine Williams's attempt to make much of—and then belittle—an economic crime, which was not really a theft, makes sense. Only in that way could she hope to submerge the more damning social crime that lay beneath it. In the long run, Williams's deception distorted the structure of the girl's life relatively little. By January 1823, her 'theft' had caught up with her, forced her out of North Providence, and lowered her into a twilight world of social suspicion from which she could never quite emerge" (35).

feelings of superiority over *poor*, fallen human nature” (80). Cornell becomes barred from the community’s benevolence and acceptance as well as from economic opportunity. The mandates of factory life for young women have tangible effects upon Cornell’s demise.

These often forced relocations of Cornell are not only because of the derision she receives from other women, but also because of the demands of the textile market itself. At times unemployed, her movement from town-to-town follows the availability of factory jobs. In many ways, this lack of stability drives her attraction toward Methodism, which provides a stable institutional presence across towns that her employment and family are unable to provide. Before arriving at Fall River, Cornell worked at a factory in Slatersville, which burned down; the Branch Factory, which was unsatisfactory; Mendon Mills, a woolen manufactory that proved much different from the cotton work she had been accustomed to; a manufactory at Dedham, which she left on account of there being no Methodist meeting nearby; as well as Millville, Dorchester, Lowell, and Boston — all within the space of a few years. It is no wonder that her mother called her “a moving planet” (Williams 135). Even though, from the start, jobs at textile factories were meant to be temporary (no longer than a few years), Cornell’s frequent movement reveals the impermanence not only of the work, but also of the factory community.<sup>44</sup> Industrial spaces would not be able to establish themselves as spaces of economic and moral development if they did not have a permanent presence within the community and the landscape.

In the end, this formulation works more to the benefit of the manufacturers themselves than it does provide any sense of social justice. In all likelihood, Kasserman points out, Williams’s narrative was commissioned by the Fall River Committee, who desired to deflect

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<sup>44</sup> In addition to the mill at Slatersville having been burned down, Williams details how Cornell sees several other mill fires as well.

blame away from the town itself. Williams's depiction of Cornell's death worked to the manufacturer's favor, as Kasserman argues that

by turning public attention toward Avery and the Methodist church, the manufacturers were able to sidestep responsibility for Sarah's deviance and death. Labeling the Methodists as radicals with philosophies of both government and salvation that were dangerous innovations, the manufacturers reinforced their association with good morals and traditional society by working within the bounds of time-honored institutions. (Kasserman 252)

For all of the ways the factory fails to provide for or live up to its promises, Williams's final note of warning is for young women to avoid Methodism, not employment in the mill.

### ***No Room in Frame for Blame***

Williams's reluctance to place any blame on the manufactory was not particular to her text, being a common feature of many factory novels in the nineteenth century. In Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's "The Tenth of January" (1868), a fictionalization of the 1860 fire at the Pemberton Mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the fire is not the fault of the manufactory itself, but of a variety of different individual laborers. Though Phelps tells how on the day of the fire the company installed new machinery on the second floor, described as "heavy, very heavy" (Phelps, "Tenth," 76), but which nonetheless will bring the company increased profits, it is not because of this new machinery that the second floor collapses. Instead, the cause is almost unknowable:

Who shall say what it was to the seven hundred and fifty souls who were buried in the ruins? What to the eighty-eight who died that death of exquisite agony? What to the wrecks of men and women who endure unto this day a life that is worse than death? What to that architect and engineer who, when the fatal pillars were first delivered to them for inspection, had found one broken under their eyes, yet accepted the contract, and built with them a mill whose thin walls and wide, unsupported stretches might have tottered over massive columns and on flawless ore? (342)

If the cause of the fire should lie on anyone's conscience, Phelps claims, it is the architect and engineer, whose individual malfeasance is unassociated with the Pemberton Corporation.

After years of utilizing the picturesque to show just how attuned the manufactory was to Northern cultural values, the conscience of the manufactory had all but been subsumed by its cultural positioning within the landscape. Nowhere is this more present, for Lucy Larcom, than in Lowell's dependency on slave-grown cotton. As Larcom emphasizes in her poetic memoir, *An Idyl of Work*, the conscientiousness of Northern mill girls working with Southern cotton was an individual, not a corporate problem. For Larcom, the taint of slavery is impossible to remove from the cotton she works with, as the labor which gathered it demoralizes her own labor:

‘When I’ve thought,  
Miss Willoughby, what soil the cotton-plant  
We weave, is rooted in, what waters it, —  
The blood of souls in bondage,— I have felt  
That I was sinning against light, to stay  
And turn the accursed fibre into cloth  
For human wearing. I have hailed one name,  
You know it — ‘Garrison’ — as a slave might hail  
His soul’s deliverer. Am not I enslaved  
In finishing what slavery has begun?’

‘And I, dear Esther Hale, in wearing cloth  
So rooted, and so woven, am as wrong  
As you are. We all share the nation’s sin.  
The time may come, when with our dearest blood  
This blood must be repaid.’ (Larcom 135-6)

The mill girl is here positioned as an intermediary link in the supply chain, as “finishing what slavery has begun.” Rather than this being a problem for the manufactory, Larcom presents it as a question of individual conscience. Though this conscience is shared by many others (“We all share the nation’s sin”), these others are individuals like herself, not the complicit corporate bodies.

As industrialism in the North continued to develop at a rapid pace, replacing agriculture as the primary means of lower and middle-class labor (especially in the Northeast), “the cry of conscience” that spoke out against slavery was increasingly silenced by those who, like many of the women employed within the mills and like the owners of the manufactories themselves, rationalized the stifling of their conscience through the promise of domestic prosperity.

### **CHAPTER III**

#### **FUGITIVE GOODS: BLACK NORTHERNERS AND THE RHETORIC OF (UN)FREE LABOR**

'B——. *Furniture maker; twenty years in the city; worth ten thousand dollars. . .*  
 'C——. *Full black; stolen from Africa; sold in New Orleans . . . paid for himself*  
*six hundred dollars . . . probably worth fifteen or twenty thousand dollars, all earned by*  
*himself.*  
 'K——. *Full black; dealer in real estate; worth thirty thousand dollars . . .*  
 'G——. *Full black; coal dealer; about thirty years old; worth eighteen thousand*  
*dollars . . .*  
 'W——. *Three-fourths black; barber and waiter; from Kentucky; nineteen years*  
*free; paid fifteen hundred dollars for self and family . . . worth six thousand dollars'*  
 —Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (635)

The final chapter of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* attempts to present the value of freedom for African Americans in financial terms. Stowe claims to provide the above list to show the ability of free African Americans to procure gainful employment and economically thrive outside of slavery, yet it nevertheless is somewhat odd that in a book so stridently abolitionist, Stowe's closing remarks resort to a measurement of dollars and cents to convey the impact of freedom upon black lives. "B," we are told, is "worth ten thousand dollars." "G.D." fetches the lowest price at "six thousand dollars," while "K" is valued at a full "thirty thousand dollars" (Stowe 635). The narrator seems to delight in these facts, seeing them as evidence of the ability of free African Americans to conquer social, cultural, and economic barriers.

Stowe's remarks use the rhetoric of quantifiable individual net worth that continues to this day. Visit the website of *Forbes* and you can find a variety of different lists providing a numeric value of how much various businessmen and businesswomen are "worth." However, deploying the language of the free market to express the valuation of a black individual was a tricky proposition in the era of slavery. The expressions of monetary value Stowe assigns to free African Americans living near Cincinnati bears an uneasy resemblance to figurations of the price they would have been assigned in the slave market just across the Ohio River, a border the proximity of which the novel has repeatedly reminded the reader.

Stowe's rhetoric here draws attention to the peculiar relationship Northern and Southern black laborers held to the rhetoric and ideology of free market capitalism. Within the North, Stowe can employ the language of dollars and cents to laud the net worth of an African American; in the South, those same figures would have a much different meaning. Walter Johnson reminds us in *Soul by Soul* that black individuals were routinely "broken down into parts and recomposed as commodities" (W. Johnson, *Soul*, 3) within the Southern market. These monetary valuations assigned to black bodies were "constructed upon the idea that the bodies of enslaved people had a measurable monetary value, whether they were ever actually sold or not" (25), and Johnson explains how such figurations were foundational to Southern capitalism. The linkage between the rhetoric of value and worth that abolitionists and slave traders alike applied to black bodies regularly conflated notions of selfhood, property, and labor. In the North, abolitionists like Stowe used this language to equivocate financial and human value with freedom. In the South, this language led to what J.W.C. Pennington describes in *The Fugitive Blacksmith* as "the chattel principle," wherein "The being of slavery, its soul and body, live[d] and move[d]" (Pennington iv) through economic channels. The chattel principle draws particular attention to slavery's dependency upon "the property principle, [and] the bill of slavery principle" (iv-v), reminding us that slavery relies principally on a set of economic transactions. The bodies of black individuals constantly signified their potential commodification, representing what literary scholar Stephen Best describes as "a unique species of 'living property'" (Best 2). The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 served as a reminder that neither the chattel nor property principle were peculiarities to the South, that these principles pervaded the American economic and legal systems.



However, movement between these two different systems and forms of valuation – labor value in the North, commodity value in the South – at times enabled new modes of resistance and new routes towards freedom. Henry “Box” Brown occupied a box and had himself “conveyed as dry goods to a free state” (Brown 58), mimicking his commoditized status under Southern capitalism to procure his freedom in the North. As with Brown, “cargo,” “objects,” and other various forms of “property” were frequently used as codes to describe black passengers on the Underground Railroad. In these accounts, African-Americans and their allies employed the idea and rhetoric of “property” assigned to slaves under the system of chattel slavery to envision and procure freedom in the North. Through such a process, Samuel Ringgold Ward describes in his 1855 *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro* how “each [slave] carried off in his own person from 400 to 2,000 dollars. There was no telling what amount of property had thus been abstracted—or, rather, stolen itself” (Ward 104).

Such employment of the language of free market capitalism should not be regarded as only rhetorical manipulation. The facts of Brown’s case are that through a network of correspondence and care from abolitionists, he hid in a box and was shipped from the South to the North, evading immediate detection and eluding pursuit from slavery-sympathizers. Nevertheless, the fact that when describing the process Brown describes himself as similar to “dry goods” is both ironic and, in a very material way, true. Such accounts as Brown’s offer a glimpse into the psychology of antebellum capitalism for those located outside its dominant operating modes: free and slave labor.

Perhaps paradoxically, I argue that in order to better understand the subject position of African Americans as laborers, participants, and agents within the antebellum Northern economy, we must read depictions and descriptions of black labor through the lens of Southern

capitalism, the economic system African Americans were largely identified with legally and culturally throughout the antebellum era. Indeed, however distant they were from the geographic boundaries of the South, African Americans were nevertheless continuously enmeshed within the economic and rhetorical system of chattel slavery. Passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 underscored this reality most strikingly, with the law demanding that Northern citizens aid and assist the return of fugitive slaves into the servitude of their Southern master. The narratives I focus on in this chapter, stories written by Henry “Box” Brown, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, Frank J. Webb, and Frances E.W. Harper, show “free” black labor as existing somewhere in between the ideological and economic systems of Northern and Southern capitalism. These texts attempt to navigate and figure out the various rights, liberties, and identities available to black workers within that liminal space. In the African American texts that negotiate the different personal, economic, and legal identities that existed between the Southern and Northern economies, we often see a narrative at odds with the free labor ideology most commonly associated with the antebellum era. Especially for former slaves, escaping to the North did not wholly transform one from a slave to a free laborer.

The commoditized status of black bodies under the economic and legal system of slavery did not cease to exert influence over the lives and livelihoods of black Americans once they left the South. Literary scholars, however, have often assumed that it did, following the moralist approach of abolitionists by recognizing that obviously slaves were people, not things, and therefore it is assumed they were more amenable to the basic tenets of free labor idealism, such as the right to own oneself and one’s labor. However, to apply such a view at times ignores the very rhetoric African Americans and abolitionists used to argue for and present their humanity,

the ways they utilized the language of the free market to formulate their economic positions, rights, and identities.

In many of the canonical slave narratives and antislavery literature, this contextual framework is read as a given, the idea of “thingness” a concept actively disavowed and reputed by slaves and the abolitionist movement. William Lloyd Garrison, in his Preface to Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, contrasts Douglass’s eloquence as a speaker with the fact that “by the law of the land, by the voice of the people, by the terms of the slave code, he was only a piece of property, a beast of burden, a chattel personal” (Garrison 4). When Stowe writes of George that he “was in the eye of the law not a man, but a thing” (Stowe 18), or when Douglass tells “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (Douglass, *Narrative*, 47), the categorical realities of persons and things are presented as irreconcilable opposites, used to highlight the immoral nature and reality of life under slavery. What this chapter draws attention to, however, is the economic rhetoric that underscores and unsettles this binary. Continuing to echo the abolitionists’ moral polarization of persons and things downplays the influence of both the legal and economic rhetoric that daily affected black lives throughout the antebellum era.

Black workers both South and North were consistently under threat of having their right to labor determined not by themselves, but by the slavery-based market. For many slaves escaping to freedom in the North, in Canada, or in England, the status and title of “thing” provoked new ways of conceptualizing their relationship to both freedom and capitalism. Slave narratives and discussions of labor by black leaders like Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany, in black periodicals such as *Frederick Douglass’s Newspaper*, articulate an understanding of capitalism as routed through bodily identity, a reality distinct from that of Northern white wage

laborers. As slave laborers attempted to transition into wage laborers, from Southern to Northern capitalism, and from a slave to a free market, they experienced a different relationship to the market from that of whites, one that was consistently valenced by the Southern market that viewed black individuals as both laborers and representations of capital. Not all African Americans, whether formerly enslaved or not, found such quick employment as did Frederick Douglass when he arrived in New Bedford.

Economic life in the North was not only different on the grounds of the types of employment available, but psychologically different as well. Perhaps the starkest difference between the Northern and Southern economies was how they perceived one's right to labor: whereas in the South one's labor could be legally owned by another, in the North, a free labor philosophy claimed an individual had an inherent right to own their own labor. As Frederick Douglass showed in his autobiographies and editorials like "Learn Trades or Starve!" the transference of assumed property status from one's personhood to one's labor had its own set of difficulties, especially for the large number of free blacks who routinely found the labor market closed off. Indeed, African Americans throughout the nineteenth century experienced distinctive difficulties in navigating the market, ranging from the prejudices of white workers and employers to the legally precarious position they occupied somewhere in between the status of property and person. The ways African American literature imagined, described, and navigated these difficulties shows that the ethical standards Northern capitalism had built itself upon and associated itself with did not so readily apply to black laborers.

## *The Self-Absconding Commodity*

Even if a slave was not placed on the auction block, the status of commodity could never quite be lost or forgotten. In the slave's case, the line between metaphorical and actual commodity value was routinely blurred, Johnson reminding us that "though they were seldom priced, slaves' values always hung over their heads" (W. Johnson, *Soul*, 19). As early as 1788, a satirical piece appearing in *American Museum* makes this point uncomfortably clear. The article, appearing without title or author and presented as a letter to the editor, begins with noting that "I have observed an advertisement in a late paper, of a plantation to be sold in Maryland for 'negroes, merchandize, or cash'" and purports to offer a helpful table "To save trouble in counting or calculating the value of this new black flesh coin." The table lists:

		Dollars.
1.	A middle aged healthy negro man or woman.	— 300
2.	A negro man or woman above 55 years of age.	— 100
3.	All negro boys and girls between 12 and 18 years of age.	— 100
4.	All negro children between 6 and 12 years of age	— 80
As change will be necessary in this species of money, the following mode may be adopted to obtain it.		
		Dollars.
	A negro's head,	20
	A right arm,	16
	A left arm,	12
	A leg,	8
	A hand and foot,	4
	A thumb and great toe,	I
	A finger and toe of the common size,	2 3-ds of a dollar
	A little finger and toe,	I 3-d of a dollar <sup>45</sup>

Satiric in the tradition, as Richard Amacher writes, of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," the table underscores a reality of commoditized status for black bodies in early America. The

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<sup>45</sup> The table originally appears in the July, 1788 issue of Mathew Carey's *American Museum* and is reprinted in Richard E. Amacher's article "A New Franklin Satire?" as well as by Michael O'Malley in *Face Value*. Amacher convincingly argues that the author of the anonymous article is actually Benjamin Franklin. O'Malley is interested in the article for its description of a "black flesh coin" as it relates to the standard and valuation of Early American money. See Richard E. Amacher, "A New Franklin Satire?" and O'Malley, *Face Value*, especially pages 36-38.

commodity value of slaves is used here to break down each part of the black body into its own independent commodity with a corresponding value. Through such a description, the satire highlights the backwards logic at work when a black body is granted a non-divisible economic value, rendering the body as a commodity whose commoditized form is rendered nonsensical by its inability to be broken down into component parts. The component parts, when abstracted from the whole, are unable to perform the same labor function as they could if still attached, a fact the list pays special attention to by assigning each body part a value corresponding to its laboring potential when attached to the whole body. Thus, a little finger and toe are worth the least amount, since their abstraction would provide relatively little hindrance to labor if removed from the laborer, but do not provide any labor value or function on their own; the little finger and toe hold commodity value, but no labor value.

The satire forces a disjunction between a body's laboring and commodity selves, the top half highlighting one's potential value as a laborer, the bottom half providing the monetary worth of one's component parts. And while the piece highlights this disjunction to expose its absurdity, the ideological and rhetorical shift was real enough within the slave economy. For example, in Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), Equiano advocates in the end for the cessation of the slave trade by making his appeal on economic grounds and drawing upon his experiences as a beginning capitalist. At times when Equiano describes his mercantile ventures, there appears a similar blurring of the distinctions between person, slave, and commodity, such as when he and another slave go ashore in Santa Cruz to try and sell bags of fruit they had brought with them. Upon arriving, two white men steal their bags from them, and Equiano pleads to the men for their return, telling them "these three bags were all we were worth in the world" (Equiano 117). Equiano's capitalist activity, by this point in the

text, is valuable and profitable to both himself and his master, and the theft of his fruit bags thus amounts to not only a theft of material goods, but a theft of the independent identity he had worked to cultivate and which the commodities represent. When Equiano tells the white thieves the bags of fruit are “all we are worth in the world,” he views commodified property as representing his own identity. Indeed, it must be remembered that the whole reason Equiano ventures into his mercantile endeavors is so that he can earn enough money to buy his freedom (which his master values at 40£). The bags of fruit thus serve as an allegory for Equiano’s transition from free to slave: like Equiano, the fruit is taken from one state and transported to another, to be sold for profit in the market; also, like Equiano, the fruits are deprived of their independent earning potential by thieves.

Equiano thus speaks literally when he equates his worth with the fruits, since there is a direct correlation between the potential capital of the fruits and Equiano’s potential status as a free man. The intervention of the white thieves disrupts the capitalist narrative of the self-made man, which Equiano believes could eventually procure his freedom and potentially end the slave trade. Thus, when Equiano conflates his dual status as a slave and a capitalist with the commodified fruits, their theft exposes how both identities are susceptible to the actions of white men who act according to a more privileged set of economic rules. Indeed, the white men steal the bags not so they can sell them on their own, but merely to possess and enjoy what is literally the fruit of Equiano’s labors.

By the antebellum period, identifying with commodities began to open up potential moments of resistance. Whereas Equiano likens his own position as a slave to the unfair theft of his fruits, Henry “Box” Brown likens himself to material goods so as to procure his escape from slavery. Brown’s *Narrative of the Life of Henry “Box” Brown* (1851) details his unique escape

from slavery by means of shutting himself up in a box and shipping himself to an abolitionist group in Philadelphia, describing his ability to elude slaveholders by travelling quickly and clandestinely via the U.S. mail route.<sup>46</sup> Through such a method, the status of property is used not to signify a dehumanized or commodified status, but rather to mark the transition between various economic identities. What makes Brown's escape from slavery *as a piece of property* so threatening is that it turns the economic system that designated him as a piece of property on its head.

When Henry "Box" Brown likens himself to "dry goods," he does not entirely speak in metaphor, as underneath slavery both were regarded as commodities. Both could demonstrate and accrue capital value, be traded, sold, held as mortgage, and otherwise embroiled in a wide range of financial and capitalist activity on the part of their owners.<sup>47</sup> This concept of property, of "thingness," followed African Americans into the North. Court cases such as the 1842 *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*, the 1851 *Thomas Sims* case, and the Dred Scott decision of 1857 confirmed legal opinion about the presumed and exhibited property values of slaves, and the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made sure the specter of property continually loomed over a person and constantly threatened his or her sense of independence.<sup>48</sup> As Solomon Northup demonstrates in *Twelve Years a Slave*, being (re)turned into property could happen at a moment's notice. Being

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<sup>46</sup> Though certainly unique, Brown's *Narrative* had a somewhat mixed reception. Brown found an audience for both his *Narrative* and a subsequent speaking tour, but Frederick Douglass best characterizes a more negative reception, claiming in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that "Had not Henry Box Brown and his friends attracted slaveholding attention to the manner of his escape, we might have had a thousand *Box Browns* per annum" (Douglass, *Bondage*, 235).

<sup>47</sup> Legal scholar and theorist Gregory Alexander discusses in *Commodity and Propriety* how "Slaves in fact did constitute an item of commercial merchandise that . . . functioned as a means of creating individual wealth, at least for the elite segment of Southern society" (Alexander 213).

<sup>48</sup> *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* ruled that federal law regarding fugitive slaves superseded state laws, meaning that efforts in Pennsylvania to prevent the capture and return of fugitive slaves into bondage was unconstitutional. Thomas Sims, under the mandate of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, was taken from Boston and returned to slavery. The Dred Scot decision ruled that slaves, even if then currently free, were not and could not become citizens.



considered a “thing” was not merely rhetorical hyperbole invented by abolitionists to highlight the immorality of slavery, but a constant threat and reality embedded in American capitalism.<sup>49</sup>

Brown’s emergence from the wooden crate he was confined in for the entirety of a 27-hour journey from Virginia to Philadelphia both surprised and delighted his abolitionist friends, who were just as grateful to find him alive as they were to have aided his escape from slavery. Of all the remarkable elements of Brown’s story—not the least of which is that his plan to ship himself in a box actually worked—contemporary commentators were especially drawn to details of the box that held him during his passage from the South to the North, from slavery to freedom. To epitomize this fascination, Brown’s moment of emergence from the box was routinely chosen as the exemplar of his narrative, always accompanied by some detail of the box itself: details of the dynamics of the box, such as figure 3.1, which notes its physical dimensions “3 feet long 2 ½ feet deep and 2 feet wide;” figure 3.2, an engraving from *The Liberty Almanac* in which “This Side Up with Care” can be seen, along with a description of how the package was mishandled during its transportation; or figure 3.3, a Broadside and Engraving where the direction is changed to “Right side up with care.” The focus on the box itself draws attention to the materiality of the goods conveyed, the fact that Brown was able to ship himself, by all appearances, as a packaged good. As Brown’s *Narrative* details, upon his arrival at the abolitionist home in Philadelphia, a man knocks on the box asking “Is all right within?” Brown replies, “all right;” they open the box, Brown briefly faints, and then awakes to sing an abolitionist song, shown in figure 3.3.<sup>50</sup>

The song itself, which Brown describes as a “hymn of thanksgiving,” creates a parallel between Brown and the biblical story of Jonah, Brown emerging from the box much as Jonah

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<sup>49</sup> Alexander argues the concept of “slaves as property” was essential not only to perpetuating the system of chattel slavery, but to maintaining the social structure of Southern society, particularly upholding the aristocratic planter class. See Alexander, *Commodity and Propriety*, especially chapter eight.

<sup>50</sup> The song published in Figure 3.3 is an abridged version of the song appearing in Brown’s actual *Narrative*.

emerged from the whale. Thus Brown's emergence reads not only as a movement from thing to person, or from the South to the North, but from slave to prophet, wherein Brown is able to both recognize and transcend his own commodity status under slavery. Both Jonah and Brown undergo confinement within containers (a whale and a box, respectively) that enact their deliverance once they recognize, accept, and admit the reasons they were placed within that container to begin with: Jonah admits his sin to his shipmates, Brown admits his own commoditized status by likening himself to "dry goods." Brown thus demonstrates a hyper-awareness of his material and commoditized nature, and through that recognition is able to ensure what he describes as his "deliverance," to liberate himself from both slavery and the box (Brown 62). A hymn was especially poignant at this moment since, as Claudia Stokes reminds us in *The Altar at Home*, hymns had a "long association with controversial religious radicalism, anti-authoritarianism, and populism" (Stokes 68). Brown's hymn both sanctifies his "deliverance" from materiality and slavery in addition to the work of the abolitionists who greet him in Philadelphia.

After his liberation, Brown went on a speaking tour with his box, and spectators were drawn to the materiality of Brown's escape, both the details of the box and details of the person contained within. Indeed, on many of his speaking tours Brown would climb back inside the box and reemerge, a demonstration of the material conditions surrounding his escape from slavery. This continued relationship between Brown and the box is more than just evidence of his "ingenuity," showing how the material conditions of his time in bondage continue to follow him even outside of slavery.

His material status is a condition that follows Brown from the beginning of his life, shown in the opening lines of his *Narrative* when he says that he was born "a slave because my

countrymen had made it lawful, in utter contempt of the declared will of heaven, for the strong to lay hold of the weak and to buy them as marketable goods” (Brown 15). Throughout the *Narrative*, Brown describes how his material identity is continually rewritten by local slaveholders for economic gain. From his birth, Brown was “robbed of myself” by his mother’s owners, who “branded me with the mark of bondage, and by such means I became their own property” (16). And it is through this idea of property that Brown’s worth is continually measured and evaluated throughout his life. As a child, while performing agrarian labor, his value as a slave is measured against that of nearby plantation slaves, who are routinely whipped and therefore, according to a nearby slaveholder, more valuable laborers; the slaveholder says that Brown will never “be of any value” (23). In the slaveholder’s eyes, value is determined not only by a slave’s capacity for labor, but also by the degree to which he or she is treated, understood as, and identified with property, a tool for labor socially subordinate and subject to the will of the master.

Even when Brown begins to accumulate his own property, its value is ultimately determined not by Brown, but by the governing slave-holders of the community. The point is most prominently displayed by the theft and selling of Brown’s family members by Cottrell, his wife’s master. After being unable to pay increasingly large extortion fees demanded by his wife’s master, Brown learns just hours after leaving home for work one day that his wife, children, and various items of household property had each been sold at auction by Cottrell, for the reason that he had “a demand for a large amount” of money right away. He proclaims to Brown that “I want money, and money I will have” (Brown 47). After buying back his material possessions from the sheriff, and in the process of returning them home, Cottrell confronts Brown in the street:

He stopped me and said he had heard I had been to the sheriff's office and got away my things. Yes I said I have been and got away *my things* but I could not get away *my wife and children* whom you have put beyond my power to redeem. He then began to give me a round of abuse, while his two Christian friends stood by and heard him, but they did not seem to be the least offended at the terrible barbarity which was there placed before them. (51)

Whereas Cottrell refers to both material goods and family members in the language of things, Brown makes a point to emphasize their difference in his response to Cottrell. The distinction is prompted by the presence of Cottrell's Christian companions, foregrounding not so much the property law of Southern slavery, but the moral structure of the community itself. Cottrell and his "two Christian friends" regard "not the social, or domestic feelings of the slave, and makes his division according to the *moneyed* value they possess, without giving the slightest consideration to the domestic or social ties by which the individuals are bound to each other" (29). Brown distinguishes his things from family members in an attempt to connect what he presumes will be the moral sensibility of the Christian witnesses to an act of economic injustice. However, Cottrell and his Christian companions see no such distinctions between people and things, exposing domestic and social ties under slavery (such as wife, husband, and children) to be irrelevant compared with monetary value.

The turn in Brown's phrasing marks a broader conceptual shift regarding identity politics, in which Brown transitions from a view of himself as economic agent into a property-less subject, that parallels his growth as a laborer. Employed in a tobacco factory, a trade that a local store owner informs Brown is "a money-making one," Brown is able to make enough money to own a house, material possessions, and to live with and provide for his family of four (Brown 56). Cottrell's theft, however, robs Brown of both his possessions and the relative happiness he had gained through his work at the tobacco manufactory, reinforcing his commodified status. As a slave, Brown repeatedly finds his personhood devalued, but once he gets the idea of "shutting

myself *up in a box*, and getting myself conveyed as dry goods to a free state” (58), he is able to manipulate the subject position of commodities within the Southern economy to his benefit. Brown posits that the status of “thing” is a property of the self that, although unable to be resisted within the slave-economy, can be used to one’s advantage. After continually being surprised by and resistant to the status of “thing,” it is only once Brown positions himself as a “thing” that he is able to transcend his slave status, to gain his freedom in the North.

The ultimate irony of Brown’s escape is that it is the very way the Southerners treat their commodified property that leads to Brown’s revelation on the falsity of property as a measure of one’s value and worth. Similar to what Walter Johnson argues in *Soul by Soul*, Brown describes how the recognition of his humanity or personhood is always under threat of being only temporary, for “The slave has always the harrowing idea before him—however kindly he may be treated for the time being—that the auctioneer may soon set him up for the public sale and knock him down as the property of the person who, whether man or demon, would pay his master the greatest number of dollars for his body” (Brown 20). Of course, the value of slaves as property that Brown describes paled in comparison to the value of the slaveholding power itself. For more important than the actual monetary value ascribed to slaves was the *idea* itself, Michael O’Malley claims, of slaves having “inherent value” because of their subjugated positions. As O’Malley demonstrates, the inherent, speculative, and potential value of slaves as property was a figuration of their blackness itself, their marking as a potential slave, whether or not they actually were. O’Malley equates this logic to nineteenth-century views towards the gold standard, which, although its actual form “might not circulate at all,” it is “the *idea* of gold [that] matters: a store of natural and non-negotiable value. So too with slaves: even in areas where slavery had ceased to exist, the *idea* of the ‘negro,’ naturally and intrinsically inferior, anchored speculations of all

sorts. Slaves had a real labor value and a commodity value dependent on the idea of racial difference” (O’Malley 75-76). It was this commodity value of slaves that anchored Southern economic dealings, functioning in a similar way, O’Malley argues, to a central bank, thereby stabilizing the economy. For “Slaves had value not just because of their labor: they had a value as capital, as money” (44). Brown’s *Narrative*, however, shows how O’Malley’s figuration of the “idea” of value cut both ways, having a psychological effect on the slaves themselves. Brown’s conveyance into the free states as dry goods thus manipulates not only the property system of slavery, but the very psychological underpinnings it relies upon, that slaves, through their commodified subjectivity, exhibited a non-circulating value that “anchored” the Southern economy.

In escaping to freedom, fugitive slaves like Brown were literally taking capital outside of the Southern economy and diminishing the net worth of their slaveholders. Fugitive slaves would frequently remark upon this dynamic in their narratives. Pennington describes how the loss of such capital could prove financially ruinous to the slaveholder: “The immense fortune he [the slaveholder] possessed when I left him, (bating one thousand dollars I brought with me in my own body,) and which he seems to have retained till that time, began to fly, and in a few years he was insolvent” (Pennington 61). An 1850 article from *DeBow’s Review*, titled “Fugitive Slaves,” published in response to the Fugitive Slave Law, quotes extensively from a pamphlet printed in Washington by “Randolph of Roanoke” to estimate the amount of this yearly loss. From the years of 1810 to 1850, “Fugitive Slaves” estimates the net total loss of “61,624 fugitive slaves, valued at \$450 each” to be “\$27,730,800” (“Fugitive Slaves” 567). This number should not be read as solely proslavery rhetoric, as the mathematic equation cut across party and sectional lines. Abraham Lincoln, in an 1860 speech at Hartford, Connecticut, similarly recognized the

monetary value the South drew from slaves: “The slaves have the same ‘property quality,’ in the minds of their owners, as any other property. The entire value of the slave population of the United States, is, at a moderate estimate, not less than \$2,000,000,000. This amount of *property* has a vast influence upon the minds of those who own it. The same amount of property owned by Northern men has the same influence upon *their* minds” (Lincoln 3). Even though Northern and Southern minds hold different ideas of what constitutes property according to their specific economies, there was nonetheless recognition of the aggregate value and influence of property, however determined.

Lincoln’s larger point in his speech is that a fuller understanding of slavery is necessary for preservation of the Union, that it is not enough to only view slavery as a moral wrong. Recognition of the property value of slaves to the South was, he posited, one of the fundamental misunderstandings and sources of tension in the slavery debate, and it is upon this understanding, Lincoln remarks, that “I think one great mistake is made by them all. I think our wisest men have made this mistake. They underrate its importance, and a settlement can never be effected until its magnitude is properly estimated” (Lincoln 3). Arguably, the Fugitive Slave Act and other examples such as the Sims case and the return of Anthony Burns connote recognition of property on the part of the North, but Lincoln’s point here is that there exists a fundamental ideological difference between the function and value of slave property between the North and the South. One of the reasons for this difference, Lincoln insinuates, is because of the tendency in the North to privilege a moral over a pecuniary lens:

Almost every man has a sense of certain things being wrong, and at the same time, a sense of its pecuniary value. These conflict in the mind, and make a riddle of a man. If slavery is considered upon a property basis, public opinion must be forced to its support. The alternative is its settlement upon the basis of its being wrong. Some men think it is a question of neither right or wrong; that it is a question of dollars and cents, only. (3-4)

The different positions towards slavery, its wrongness and its “pecuniary value,” “conflict in the mind, and make a riddle of a man,” an allegory for the nation. But as Lincoln hints, the North’s moralist stance towards slavery prevents them from seeing slaves as capital, prevents the issue from being partially “a matter of dollars and cents.” However, Thomas Kettell, a Northern economic and political writer, was able to recognize the issue in this way, much to the delight of slavery apologists.

The refusal by many Northerners to return fugitive slaves to the South, or their disregard for fugitives as pieces of property, was just one example of the various ways, according to Thomas Kettell, that the North routinely let their avowed moralism mask the fact that they were taking economic advantage of the South. In his 1860 *Southern Wealth and Northern Profits*, Kettell chastises the North for daring to instigate sectional tensions, to even consider disunion after having profited off the South for so long. Drawing from Census figures, Treasury tables, state statistics, and a variety of other data, Kettell compiles a wide array of graphs and charts, each one designed to showcase the economic superiority of the South—never mind, as economic historian Albert Fishlow explains, that much of Kettell’s data was either falsified or calculated incorrectly.<sup>51</sup> According to Kettell, the North not only accumulates capital more rapidly than the South, absorbing most of the South’s profits, but through their capital gains they begin to disdain the economic systems that enable such profits:

As the opulent always become purse-proud, so does the affluent North regard with a degree of haughtiness the very useful sections which pour riches into her lap. Exercising the prerogative of wealth she assumes the right to dictate manners and morality to those who are less thrifty in worldly matters. It is the nature of

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<sup>51</sup> Fishlow tells that Kettell’s estimations are rife with arbitrary assumptions, miscalculations, and inconsistencies with the actual data. Fishlow finds that Kettell, like many slavery apologists, selectively chooses data to work in his favor. One example that Fishlow provides is how “The direct quotation indicating the method of deriving imports is shot through with error. The actual 1859 regional proportions are totally dissimilar to the 1850 ones presumably used. Nor does Kettell allow for the more than \$39 million of total imports that went directly to the southern states without intermediate distribution” (Fishlow 272).



capital to accumulate, and the more so when the laws are so framed as to favor that accumulation. (Kettell 126)

Kettell fails to see the irony of his complaints that the North holds too much wealth and acts unfairly to the people who provide for such wealth – a charge that could be leveled at Southern planters regarding their treatment of African Americans and lower-class whites. Nevertheless, from an economic angle, the North refuses to provide monetary compensation to the Southern system that provides the speculative capital upon which the North gains its wealth. Kettell's text is thus the terminus of a line of thinking that similarly informs the Fugitive Slave Law, that the North absorbs Southern capital without fair compensation. Such a loss, in Kettell's mind, worked to both undermine the Southern economy and to exacerbate sectional tensions.

Kettell's calculations disregard the agency of former slaves such as Brown, Douglass, and Pennington within the economy. Through their manipulation of the idea of property, O'Malley tells, "African Americans who could act as economic free agents, who could negotiate their own market value, devalued" the economic, psychological, and social norms of Southern capitalism (O'Malley 45). However, assigning a specific value to the amount of this loss was more complicated than simply ascribing a monetary amount to a slave's body.

### ***Valuable Things***

On a literal level Brown represents a very real fear on the part of the South of commoditized human capital being moved into the North without compensation. But placing a specific value, or price, upon commoditized bodies was a more complicated process than the satirical *American Museum* article makes it out to be. To begin with, slavery apologists and slave law theorists had to jump through a number of hoops to present the slave as a type of what Alexander calls "noncommodified property" in order to conform to the proslavery defense of

slavery as a benevolent institution.<sup>52</sup> And yet, at the very same time, *DeBow's Review* could truthfully proclaim in 1860 that "Slave property is the foundation of all property in the South" ("Review" 799).<sup>53</sup>

The "commoditized status" of slaves was dramatically questioned by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law as part of the Compromise of 1850, then again by the Sims case in 1851, the return of Anthony Burns to slavery in 1854, and the Dred Scott case in 1857. Indeed, the legal status of both slaves and fugitive slaves, under contemporary and Constitutional law, was a subject of hot debate throughout the antebellum era, highlighted by the aforementioned high-profile cases. Oftentimes, the debate rested upon interpretation of the phrase used to describe escaped slaves, as "fugitives from service or labor."<sup>54</sup> The language comes from "what is commonly known as the first federal 'fugitive slave' act (of 1793), enacted to give force to the Constitution's fugitive labor rendition clause, [which] was actually entitled 'An act respecting fugitives from justice, and persons escaping from the service of their masters,' and likewise linked to these different types of fugitives" (Phan 12). Previous to passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, abolitionists debated the significance of this phrase as articulated both in the Constitution and in the 1793 act. William Goodell, in his 1844 *Views of American Constitutional Law, in its Bearing Upon American Slavery*, framed his analysis of the constitutionality of slavery by reputing the "strict construction" view held by pro-slavery advocates who read the

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<sup>52</sup> Alexander describes how "A commodified conception of slave property would have undermined the defense of slavery as a humane institution that fulfilled society's responsibility to protect its weakest members" (Alexander 226).

<sup>53</sup> For more on the ways slaves circulated as peculiar types of property, see O'Malley, *Face Value*, and Best, *The Fugitive's Properties*.

<sup>54</sup> For more on the Constitutional and legal history of this phrase, especially as Frederick Douglass interprets it, see Hoang Gia Phan, *Bonds of Citizenship*, especially chapter three. As Phan reminds us, though, the phrase "fugitives from service or labor" was readily recognized to mean slaves.

Constitution as pro-slavery. To refute the constructionist viewpoint of the Constitution, Goodell employed the language of “things”:

We have it in evidence that the word ‘person’ denotes a human being, a man, woman, or child, considered as *opposed to* THINGS, and *distinct from them*. We have it in evidence, likewise, that the word ‘slave’ means a *chattel personal*, A THING, and NOT a sentient being. The testimony then, is, that a ‘person’ can not be a *thing*; and that a ‘slave’ IS a thing. The word ‘person’ in the Constitution, therefore, can not mean a slave.” (Goodell 23-24)

As Goodell presents the pro-slavery argument, slaves as “things” are inherently different from slaves as either people or property, and therefore cannot be the true referents of the “fugitives from service or labor” clause of the Constitution, as it applies only to those “persons [who] may have escaped or fled” their service or labor obligations. The rhetoric of “things,” however, appears only in the proslavery interpretation of the Constitution.

In Goodell’s reading of the “fugitives from service or labor” clause, slaves are described not as things, but as property, for which the law does not and cannot recognize the ability to labor, negating the idea that property can become fugitive to itself. “The phrase ‘held to service or labor,’” Goodell explains, “does not describe the legal condition of the slave. He is held as ‘property,’ ‘goods and chattels personal;’ but the law knows nothing, and has nothing to say or to prescribe, concerning his service or uselessness, concerning his labor or his idleness” (Goodell 24). Lysander Spooner, in his 1845, *The Unconstitutionality of Slavery*, elaborates upon this point:

‘*Held to service or labor,*’ is no legal description of slavery. Slavery is property in man. It is not necessarily attended with either ‘service or labor.’ A very considerable portion of the slaves are either too young, too old, too sick, or too refractory to render ‘service or labor.’ As a matter of fact, slaves, who are able to labor, may, in general, be compelled by their masters to do so. Yet labor is not an essential or necessary condition of slavery. The essence of slavery consists in a person’s being owned as property—without any reference to the circumstances of his being compelled to labor, or of his being permitted to live in idleness, or of his being too young, or too old, or too sick to labor. (Spooner 82-83)

The ability to labor has no association with the concept of slavery as recognized by the Constitution and as practiced in the South. Together, both Goodell and Spooner “point to the fact that while slave laws define the slave as property, they say nothing of the ‘use’ value of this property, nothing concerning his labor or his idleness” (Phan 128). Though Hoang Gia Phan describes the broader influence of Goodell and Spooner’s readings of the Constitution within the abolition movement, their views on the relationship between labor and property run somewhat contrary to the modern conceptions of that relationship under the governing free labor ideology of the North.<sup>55</sup>

This particular configuration of property rights, as rights not necessarily to a person but to their labor, was seized upon by proslavery advocates such as E.N. Elliott in his introduction to *Cotton is King* (1860). According to Elliott, the formulation of slave as property, or as thing—since the slave is not specified as such in the Fugitive Slave Law—is a status conferred upon the slave only by abolitionists: “According to their definition, a slave is merely a ‘chattel’ in a human form; a *thing* to be bought and sold, and treated worse than a brute; a being without rights, privileges, or duties. Now, if this is a correct definition of the word, we totally object to the term, and deny that we have any such institution as *slavery* among us” (Elliott v). What does exist in the South, Elliott claims, is not the right to a slave as thing, but to the slave as laborer: “The person of the slave is not property, no matter what the fictions of the law may say; but the right to his labor is property, and may be transferred like any other property, or as the right to the services of a minor or an apprentice may be transferred” (vii). As Stephen Best describes this rhetorical maneuvering, the logic “asserted that slaves were ‘chattels personal’ (that the owner not only had a right to the slave’s services but also possessed total control over his person) . . . a

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<sup>55</sup> As Phan shows, Goodell and Spooner were especially influential to Frederick Douglass. For more on the influence of Goodell, Spooner, and other legal arguments on Douglass’s Constitutional thinking, see Phan, *Bonds of Citizenship*, especially chapter four.

right to labor for the most part warranted a further right to obedience” (Best 8). In this case, the labor itself is the owned commodity, the body of the slave only an extension of that commodity.<sup>56</sup>

On the surface, Elliot’s line of reasoning seems to align his position with the commoditized view of labor that existed under the free labor ideology of the North. It is here, though, that the fundamental racial differences between concepts of labor and ownership of that labor become clearer. Within the North, free labor ideology professed labor to be a self-owned commodity, a concept rooted in labor rights reaching back to the colonial era. The umbrella of free labor was especially attractive because of its increased accessibility to white Northern men.<sup>57</sup> David Roediger has shown how the pervasiveness of free labor within the North worked to instill and foster a shared concept of whiteness, creating a psychological wage that Northern white wage laborers could draw from, excluding free and enslaved black workers from the right to and profits from self-ownership of one’s labor. Indeed, Roediger writes that it is only by sharply contrasting themselves to African-Americans that white workers could partake in “the pleasures of whiteness . . . . That is, status and privileges conferred by race could be used to make up for alienating and exploitative class relationships, North and South. White workers could, and did, define and accept their class positions by fashioning identities as ‘not slaves’ and as ‘not Blacks’” (Roediger, *Wages*, 13).

The emphasis on self-ownership of labor as it related to white, wage labor, was only bolstered by abolitionists who sought to more stridently demarcate the differences between free and unfree labor. Indeed, Eric Foner writes in his landmark book, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free*

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<sup>56</sup> This line of thinking was complicated, but a version of it was shared by a number of proslavery advocates, most notably John C. Calhoun and George Fitzhugh.

<sup>57</sup> Eric Foner has shown that free labor ideology held a special appeal to the Republican party, where it was used to advance anti-slavery politics.

*Men*, that abolitionists played a unique role in shifting the paradigm regarding what counted as free and unfree labor, helping “to popularize the sharp dichotomy between slavery’s illegitimate coercions and the condition of labor in the North, and the related concept that freedom was a matter not of the ownership of productive property, but property in one’s self. Slavery’s denial of self-ownership, including ownership of one’s labor and the right to dispose of it as one saw fit, differentiated it from freedom” (E. Foner, *Free*, xxii). While Foner argues this message would only increase in the 1850s as hostility towards slavery became increasingly volatile and as anti-slavery activism became more pronounced, it is worth remembering, as Phan does, that it was also a byproduct of the North’s increasing industrialization. Indeed, drawing upon Marx, Phan explains how free labor ideology shifts the concept of employment from an exchange of services into an exchange of commodities, wherein “wage laborer and capitalist will meet as formal equals on the market (as seller and buyer of labor), through the legal form of the wage contract; and the worker must enter this market precisely because the only legal ‘property’ he owns is his labor, now a commodity for sale” (Phan 17). As Roediger, Foner and Phan make clear, the idea of labor as a self-owned commodity was more readily accessible to white workers who could compare themselves to the enslaved black workers who had no such right.<sup>58</sup>

This conflux of self-owned labor and the particular psychological benefits white workers were able to derive from it provided a further barrier to participation for free black workers in the Northern market, as the influx of both black and immigrant labor into the workplace steadily decreased available employment, pushing black workers further into jobs associated with

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<sup>58</sup> This idea was not new or particular to the nineteenth century or even to America. Indeed, Jonathan Glickstein summarizes how “Discernible in antebellum free labor ideology, to begin with, were the influences of centuries-old religious and secular intellectual traditions, prominent among these being bourgeois liberal notions of ‘possessive individualism’ which, as an accompaniment to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English mercantile capitalism, legitimated in a general way the condition of legally free manual laborers who possessed no capital and had only their labor to sell in a market economy” (Glickstein 12). However, Eric Foner makes clear that the rhetoric and legal implications of the relationship between labor and self-ownership were only amplified by the contestations over slavery of the American antebellum era.

“degraded labor.” Aside from the negative connotations and associations with “degraded” employment in the North, Edward Baptist details in *The Half Has Never Been Told* how the linkage between labor and psychological benefits was continuously being sundered in the South by the system of slavery, a result of planters’ desire to increase the yield and profits of their plantations. In order to keep up with the demands of the plantation slaveholder, under threat of torture, Baptist writes, “one had to disembody oneself. . . .One had to separate mind from hand—to become, for a time, little more than a hand” (Baptist 136-137). Even though this process “was torment,” slaves “created, on their own, new efficiencies that shortened the path from plant to sack and back in space and time. And above all, they shut down pathways in the brain so that the body . . . could become for a time the disembodied ‘hand’ of enslavers’ fantastic language” (139). In order for slavery to operate efficiently and productively for the slaveholders, slaves had to separate the mind from the body, the psyche from the act of labor, so that no mental thought or psychological benefits (or damage) were derived from the laboring process.

Baptist shows how the relationship within a slave between his or her laboring self and his or her sense of selfhood often forced a disjunction between the commoditized and non-commoditized self. Such a logic ran counter to the Northern ideology of free labor, which asked laborers to view their labor as an inherent property of the self, directly tied to not only their economic well-being, but to their self-worth, moral and psychological prosperity.<sup>59</sup> Labor as an inherent property of the self, under the ideology of free labor, tied one’s moral well-being to their labor, a connection denied to black Americans living directly within or under threat of the system of American slavery.

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<sup>59</sup> And also, as Roediger discusses, their sense of future prosperity, as wage work was viewed as “a rite of passage on the road to the economic independence of free farming or of self-employed craft labor” (Roediger, *Wages*, 45).

Slaves who did not separate their commoditized and non-commoditized selves, like George in Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, were viewed as threats to their masters, to the system of slavery, and to the idea of labor's functionality. We first encounter George when he is at work in a bagging factory, in Chapter Two of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. While there, he invents a machine that greatly expedites and benefits the factory work, to the delight of both the owners and George. However, George's master, Harris, after touring the factory and being shown the machinery by George, gets angry and decides to remove George from the factory. What so angers Harris about George's invention is not the fact that he shows a particular aptitude for machinery, or for invention, but what Harris perceives as the psychological benefits George derives from his work, benefits that Roediger shows were reserved in the world of wage labor primarily for white people, and that Baptist shows slavery had actively worked to remove. Stowe's first descriptions of George are that he is "a bright and talented young mulatto man" (Stowe 17) who "was possessed of a handsome person and pleasing manners, and was a general favorite in the factory" (18). These representations of George, in Harris's mind, are the results of George's success at wage labor, producing what Harris perceives to be physiological changes within George that Harris finds discomfiting: "He [Harris] was waited upon over the factory, shown the machinery by George, who, in high spirits, talked so fluently, held himself so erect, looked so handsome and manly, that his master began to feel an uneasy consciousness of inferiority" (18). It is the benefits George derives from this labor, his "high spirits" and "handsome and manly" appearance, that cause Harris to suddenly begin to feel inferior. Harris derives psychological benefits from his labor, betraying the legal idea under slavery that all of the benefits of George's labor are owed to his master. It is telling that when Harris thinks about this issue, he questions it in economic terms: "*What business* had his slave to be marching round the country, inventing



machines, and holding up his head among gentlemen?” (18, my emphasis). Despite the employer at the bagging-factory offering to increase Harris’s financial compensation for allowing George to work at the factory, Harris adamantly declines. To Harris, no amount of money can compensate for the benefits George derives from his labor, as they instill in George a sense of self-worth and humanity, undermining the preferred relationship between labor, property, and value in the South. George’s success at wage work in the factory does not fit into the perceived and practiced ideology of free labor in the North, namely as a system of labor whose benefits are uniquely available to white workers.

To counteract the perceived psychological benefits George receives from his wage work, Harris returns George to the plantation, subjecting him to “the meanest drudgery of the farm” (Stowe 19), “rendered more bitter by every little smarting vexation and indignity which tyrannical ingenuity could devise” (21). In particular, Harris puts George to “hoeing and digging,” labor activities with special connotations within the South, as those activities represent not only degraded plantation work, but squelch the positive psychological benefits of wage labor. In the Appendix to his *Narrative*, Henry “Box” Brown emphasizes the significance of “hoeing and digging” to the teleology of slavery, describing how hoeing and digging partake in the Southern “share-holder’s version of the creation of the human race” (Brown 67). According to Brown, “The slave-holders say that originally, there were four persons created (instead of only two) and . . . these four persons were two whites and two blacks; and the blacks were made to wait upon the whites” (67). After the two white persons pray to God to provide the two black persons with something to do besides attending to them, two bags drop out of the sky, one for each race; the bag the black persons take contains “a shovel and a hoe” and the other bag holds “a pen, ink, and paper; to write the declaration of the intention of the Almighty” (68). Since then,

each race has “proceeded to employ the Instruments which God had sent them, and ever since the colored race have bad [*sic*] to labor with the shovel and the hoe, while the rich man works with the pen and ink!” (68). Harris’s selection of “hoeing and digging” thus has special significance as they connote activities that have been divinely selected and approved for slaves to perform, reminding George of his low sociological status and reinforcing his position as a degraded laborer. Harris admits as much to George, telling him such labor will “bring me down and humble me, and he puts me to just the hardest, meanest and dirtiest work, on purpose!” (Stowe 24). Though Stowe associates wage labor with psychological benefits and slave labor with psychological oppression, black workers entering the free labor system of the North, though no longer performing slave labor, too often found the promised psychological wages of free labor barred to them.

### ***Trade Value***

It is hard to not see the frustration expressed throughout Douglass’s little-discussed “Learn Trades or Starve!” editorial, published in an 1853 issue of *Frederick Douglass’s Paper* (*FDP*). As if the title were not portentous enough, the opening lines make the stakes clearer and more dramatic: “These are the obvious alternatives sternly presented to the free colored people of the United States. It is idle, yea even ruinous, to disguise the matter for a single hour longer; every day begins and ends with the impressive less [*sic*] that free negroes must learn trades, or die” (Douglass, “Learn,” 118).<sup>60</sup> Black labor leaders like Douglass and Martin Delany thought that trades had the ability to at the very least address, if not solve, the peculiar relationship

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<sup>60</sup> It should be noted, as Robert Levine details, that Douglass is largely uncritical of Northern free market capitalism, that the “emphasis of his portrayal of the ‘free’ market remains on its ability to enable self-elevation” (Levine 135). For more on Douglass and free market capitalism, see Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity*, especially pages 133-135.

between the value and ownership of black labor.<sup>61</sup> Douglass's editorial also comes at a moment, as historian Juliet Walker describes, when "there was an increasing emphasis by black leaders on the acquisition of mechanical skills and on encouraging blacks with such skills to establish their own enterprises" (Walker 133).<sup>62</sup> Even so, many of the jobs available to black workers, as Walker continues, remained "personal service enterprises . . . especially in tailoring, catering, and barbering" (133). While in part trades offered what Douglass and Delany considered practical means of elevation, more importantly trades were presented as less susceptible to the slights and racial discrimination that so many black workers experienced within the Northern market.

To open "Learn Trades or Starve!" Douglass describes the present moment facing black workers in the North: "The old avocations, by which colored men obtained a livelihood, are rapidly, unceasingly and inevitably passing into other hands; every hour sees the black man elbowed out of employment by some newly arrived emigrant, whose hunger and whose color are thought to give him a better title to the place; and so we believe it will continue to be until the last prop is leveled beneath us" (Douglass, "Learn," 118). Historically, free black laborers had predominantly occupied the menial labor and service jobs available in the North, forming what Herman Bloch quotes one antebellum newspaper from the 1840s, *The New Moral World*, as

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<sup>61</sup> For more on the differences between Douglass and Delany regarding labor, see Levine's *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass*. Despite their differences, however, Levine notes that "Douglass shared Delany's views on the risks of blacks taking on menial jobs in white households and that Delany shared Douglass's views on the ways in which pragmatic necessity can at times compel blacks to accept demeaning positions" (Levine 52).

<sup>62</sup> For a detailed history of the types of businesses owned and operated in by black laborers in the North, see Walker's seminal book, *The History of Black Business in America*, vol. 1, especially chapters three and four. W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro* provides the best detailing of the employment available to black workers within Philadelphia during the antebellum era.

describing as “a virtual colored monopoly in these occupations” (Bloch 26-27).<sup>63</sup> “By 1840,” Bloch explains, “the Afro-American’s job ceiling was limited mainly to those occupations usually described as irksome, dirty, heavy on the muscle, and light on the brain” (31). In large part, this monopoly was created as black workers were gradually forced out of trade jobs as Northern states began abolishing slavery in the early years of the nineteenth century. Focusing in particular on New York, Bloch notes that employment in trade labor jobs “became even more restricted” after the state legally abolished slavery in 1827. W.E.B. Du Bois similarly speculates in *The Philadelphia Negro* that “it is probable that between 1790 and 1820 a very large portion, and perhaps most, of the artisans in Philadelphia were Negroes” (Du Bois 33). For much of the antebellum era, free black laborers could avail themselves of the jobs that whites did not wish to do, typically those jobs viewed as too degrading, or otherwise “beneath” whites; and because black workers were most associated with such jobs, those jobs became even more associated, for some white laborers, with “degraded” or menial labor.

However, the increasing tides of immigrants that Douglass notes, particularly the Irish, were indeed “elbowing” blacks out of their former menial labor jobs throughout the 1840s, escalating in the 1850s, and “Thus the concept of Afro-American jobs gradually became a fiction, and was destroyed with each wave of white immigrants that invaded what had formerly been considered ‘Afro-American jobs’” (Bloch 31). This wave of emigration affected both men and women in a wide range of jobs, the result being that “all groups within the black community

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<sup>63</sup> For more on black workers and trade labor jobs before the antebellum era, see Herman Bloch, *The Circle of Discrimination*, especially chapter two, and Juliet Walker, *The History of Black Business*, especially chapters one and two.

increasingly found themselves economically squeezed out, constantly pushed lower on the socioeconomic ladder” (Pease and Pease 99).<sup>64</sup>

The situation facing black laborers may be bleak, Douglass writes, but trades offer the best chance for individual and racial elevation. “Now, colored men, what do you mean to do, for you must do something?” Douglass asks. “The American Colonization Society tells you to go to Liberia. Mr. Bibbs tells you to go to Canada. Others tell you to go to school. We tell you to go to work; and to work you must go or die” (Douglass, “Learn,” 118). Of the four options Douglass lists, only the last provides the means of asserting *value*, both to society and to the race. “Men are not valued in this country,” Douglass continues,

or in any country, for what they *are*; they are valued for what they can *do*. . . . We must become valuable to society in other departments of industry than those servile ones from which we are rapidly being excluded. We must show that we can *do* as well as *be*; to this end we must learn trades. When we can build as well as live in houses; when we can *make* as well as *wear* shoes; when we can produce as well as consume wheat, corn and rye—then we shall become valuable to society. (Douglass, “Learn,” 118-119)

Douglass’s repeated italicizing of the word “do” emphasizes the distinction between commodity value and labor value, presenting trades as a way to bridge the identities black workers experienced under slavery as commodities and their new identities as valuable wage laborers. For Douglass, the learning of trades provides a means of gaining economic and sociological value by exercising control over commodities, and thus the trade laborer reaps the demonstrable products of his labor for himself, not for anyone else. It is in this way that Douglass believed

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<sup>64</sup> One manner of ensuring the learning of trades was the regular debate and discussion over the building of manual labor schools for African-Americans, wherein students could combine classical and trade labor education. Indeed, this was a note frequently discussed by black leaders in the 1840s and 1850s, including Douglass, Delany, Ward, and the National Convention of Colored People, a conversation carried along by a number of articles published in *FDP*. In the early 1850s, the National Convention of Colored People proposed and debated the formation of an industrial labor school for black Americans, to be located in the North. Eventually, plans to move forward with the school were put to a vote, losing by only two.

black workers could express individual autonomy and self-ownership and would come to be viewed as valuable laborers in the larger economy.

Engagement with society would follow engagement with the marketplace, but this assumed the marketplace was accessible, that opportunities to learn trades were readily available. This was seldom the case. Douglass tried to address the scarcity of available apprenticeships and trade labor jobs by telling his audience to remain optimistic: “*How* shall this be done? In this manner: use every means, strain every nerve to master some important mechanical art. At present, the facilities for doing this are few—institutions of learning are more readily opened to you than the work-shop; but the Lord helps them who will help themselves, and we have no doubt that new facilities will be presented as we press forward” (Douglass, “Learn,” 119). That such opportunities were “few” is a vast understatement. Discrimination against black laborers occurred for a variety of reasons. Bernard Mandel shows in *Labor, Free and Slave* that, in part, the prejudice white laborers in the Northern wage market held towards black laborers was because they were seen as direct competitors for their jobs, leading to many white workers and trade unions refusing to associate themselves with black workers. Leon Litwack, in *North of Slavery*, provides a different explanation, that “Prevailing racial stereotypes, white vanity, and the widely held conviction that God had made the black man to perform disagreeable tasks combined to fix the Negro’s economic status and bar him from the most ‘respectable’ jobs” (Litwack 157). Freedom from slavery in the North was not so easily expressed through economic agency.

In “Learn,” Douglass offers yet another explanation for the hardships Northern blacks faced in trying to find employment as laborers. At least part of the responsibility, in Douglass’s

mind, lies with the antislavery activists who advocated for the freedom of slaves, but provided less help to them once they gained their freedom:

What boss anti-slavery mechanic will take a black boy into his wheelwright's shop, his blacksmith's shop, his joiner's shop, his cabinet shop? Here is something *practical*; where are the whites and where are the blacks that will respond to it? Where are the anti-slavery milliners and seamstresses that will take colored girls and teach them trades, by which they can obtain an honorable living? (Douglass, "Learn," 119)

Douglass's italicizing of the word "practical" has a double-meaning within the context of his direct appeal to abolitionists, as Eric Foner explains how

Abolitionists of all persuasions considered aid to fugitives a form of practical antislavery action. . . . 'Practical' meant that vigilance committees devoted themselves not simply to the dramatic escapes that have come to characterize our image of the underground railroad, but day-to-day activities like organizing committees, raising funds, and political and legal action. (E. Foner, *Gateway*, 20)

If abolitionists really wanted to administer "practical" aid, Douglass claims, they must help blacks obtain employment and learn trades, a step routinely admonished by abolitionists. While Douglass described this as workplace prejudice – which it most certainly was – fiction by Frank J. Webb and Frances E.W. Harper equally faulted the lack or suppression of an ethical conscience on the part of employers.

Frank J. Webb's novel *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857) revolves around racial antagonism in Philadelphia.<sup>65</sup> An interracial couple from the South, the Garies, move to Philadelphia in the hopes that their two children will be able to receive a better education and experience less racial discrimination than they would in the South.<sup>66</sup> The friends the Garies make in Philadelphia, the Ellises (a black family) and Mr. Walters (a respected black real estate agent), are victimized by a mob composed of working-class whites, led by George Stevens, a white man

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<sup>65</sup> Though published in London in 1857, the novel was not published in America until 1969.

<sup>66</sup> While the novel continues to gain scholarly attention, much of this new attention (especially in the past decade) tends to focus on the interracial marriage of the Garies, as well as the broader theme of amalgamation.

who has personal quarrels with both Mr. Garie and Mr. Walters.<sup>67</sup> For all the respectability and goodness the black characters display throughout the novel, they meet with prejudice, discrimination, and often violence at every turn.<sup>68</sup>

When Charlie Ellis, one of the black protagonists, explains his desire to find employment so he can assist his family financially, his sister asks him of whom he has inquired. “Oh, of lots of people;” Charlie responds,

they can tell me of any number of families who are in want of a footman, but no one appears to know of a person who is willing to receive a black boy as an apprentice to a respectable calling. It’s too provoking; I really think, Ess, that the majority of white folks imagine that we are only fit for servants, and incapable of being rendered useful in any other capacity. (Webb 216)

Opportunities present themselves, but Charlie continually finds them closed off to him because of his race. Despite showing particular penmanship skills, he is denied a clerkship after his interviewees discover his race, and after another interview for a bank-note engraver position with a leading abolitionist in the city, Mr. Blatchford, is similarly denied employment after the other white workers threaten to quit if Charlie is hired.

Though certainly prejudice is present and depicted as influencing Charlie’s inability to procure employment, Webb insists in these scenes that these prejudices bespeak a bigger, more philosophical confrontation between ethics and capitalism, between the consciences and the profits of Charlie’s prospective employers. Indeed, for both of the first two interviews Charlie has, his interviewees *want* to hire Charlie, but they ultimately suppress their consciences and, anticipating pressure from their other employees, decide not to hire him. At the first interview,

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<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth Stockton argues, in “The Property of Blackness: The Legal Fiction of Frank J. Webb’s ‘The Garies and Their Friends,’” that Walters’s strength and respectability arise from his property ownership.

<sup>68</sup> These barriers stem from the white community of Philadelphia. Amy Schrager Lang argues that within the black community the Ellises are representative of “the core of an African American community within which differences of class are overridden by racial solidarity, as the Ellises’ friendships with the ragged Kinch and the wealthy Mr. Walters suggest. But insofar as class differences are dissipated by racial identification, the Garies cannot benefit from the interclass character of the black community” (Lang 51).



one of the partners desires to hire Charlie while the other believes that such a decision would jeopardize their business, upsetting their white clerks and potentially placing their business in an unfavorable position. One of the partners, Mr. Twining, tells this to Charlie's sister, Esther,

We should like to take him; but his *colour*, miss—his complexion is a *fatal* objection. It grieves me to be obliged to tell you this; but I think, under the circumstances, it would be most prudent for us to decline to receive him. We are *very* sorry—but our clerks are all young men and have a great deal of prejudice, and I am sure he would be neither comfortable nor happy with them. (Webb 222)

Hiring Charlie, according to Mr. Twining, would be bad for business. Even though the other partner, Mr. Western, does desire to hire Charlie, to “cweate a pwecedent” (221) in such practices for the other businesses to follow, Twining ultimately convinces Western to hold such desires in check to the demands of the business.

Charlie's next interview goes even further in highlighting the ways one's ethical standards, or one's conscience, is held subservient to capitalist imperatives within the Northern workplace. Charlie applies for an apprenticeship at the engraving business of Thomas Blatchford, a renowned abolitionist within the city. Initially, Blatchford hires Charlie, but when Charlie turns up to work the following week Blatchford's employees throw off their caps and aprons, informing him “the men and boys discovered that you intended to take a nigger apprentice and have made up their minds if you do they will quit in a body” (Webb 225). Blatchford, in disbelief that such vehement prejudice would exist in his workshop, is placed into “a most disagreeable position” since he had just received a large order for which he needs all his employees, without whom he would be ruined. “To accede to his workmen's demands,” Webb characterizes Blatchford's dilemma, “he must do violence to his own conscience; but he dared not sacrifice his business and bring ruin on himself and family even though he was right” (226). Blatchford seeks counsel from a friend, who tells him “There is no question as to what you must

do. You mustn't ruin yourself for the sake of your principles. You will have to abandon the lad; the other alternative is not to be thought of for a moment" (226). The abolitionist Blatchford, who wants to do the right thing and hire Charlie, is caught in a tangle of market relationships that ask him to suppress his conscience in order to remain financially solvent for both himself and his family. Again, Charlie shows aptitude for the work, but his physical presence within the workspace, shared with white workers, drains his labor of any potential value.

The black laborers in Frances E.W. Harper's novella *Trial and Triumph* (1888-1889), published serially in the *Christian Recorder*, experience workplace discrimination similar to the situations Charlie describes. Harper, however, more explicitly locates this discrimination within issues of class, stating "this pride of caste dwarf's men's moral perception so that it prepares them to do a number of contemptible things which, under other circumstances, they would scorn to do" (Harper 221). As literary scholars Frances Smith Foster and Andréa N. Williams have pointed out, *Trial and Triumph* is a novel that foregrounds a black community and works to define what sorts of characteristics and mannerisms ground one within a certain class or social status. Within the late 1880s, Williams argues, "Harper's attention to the language of class and respectability is a historically relevant, strategic move to concomitantly reform both race and class relations" (Williams 28). Thus Harper's interlinking of morality and caste is especially significant not only because it privileges moral responsibility as a deciding factor within business relationships, but because it partakes in what Williams describes as Harper's larger "socio political argument" wherein Harper "posits an alternative taxonomy in which moral respectability—enacted through temperance, sexual purity, thrift, modesty, work ethic, polite manners, and other attributes—is the non-pecuniary basis of status" (26). Thus *Trial and*

*Triumph* is “explicitly concerned with race and interracial progress,” as Foster claims, and this progress is couched within the class system (Foster xxxiv).

The learning of trades within *Trial* presents an opportunity for class mobility without the strings of race attached to it.<sup>69</sup> One of the featured characters, Mr. Thomas, is a particularly skilled carpenter from the South, although after arriving in the North he initially finds it difficult to procure work on account of his race. There was one opportunity he takes advantage of for a little while, at the employ of an English builder, but even here, the social demands of the builder’s white workers force the Englishman to suppress his conscience and fire Mr. Thomas, feeling that “as much as he deprecated the injustice, it was the dictum of a vitiated public opinion that his field of occupation should be closed against the Negro, and he felt that he was forced, either to give up his business or submit to the decree” (Harper 237).

However, through persistence and repeated demonstration of the excellent quality of his work, eventually the basic tenets of capitalism, the desire to procure the best product at the least cost, begin to exert themselves in Mr. Thomas’s favor, separating his labor from the social prejudices expressed towards his person. As Thomas explains to Rev. Lomax, who was unable to hire Thomas for a construction project associated with his church because the other white laborers would refuse to work with him, the way to remove this prejudice is to separate the laborers from the labor at the start. Thomas tells the Reverend that he should have told the Master builder who refused working alongside Thomas that

We are in communication with a colored master builder in Kentucky, who is known as an efficient workman and who would be glad to get the job, and if your

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<sup>69</sup> Williams argues that race crucially augments class mobility within the novel. Where we differ, however, is in our focus: Williams focuses on the female protagonists in *Trial*, whereas I focus on the male characters. Williams’ larger argument is that increasing one’s “moral respectability” offered the best means of increasing class status (Williams 29). Women in the novella, however, have avenues available to them to increase this quality outside of the workplace, avenues such as domestic relations, perceived as not being primarily associated with men. See Williams, *Dividing Lines*, especially chapter one.

men refuse to work with a colored man our only alternative will be to send for colored carpenters and put the building in their hands.' Do you think he would have refused a thirty thousand dollar job just because some of his men refused to work with colored men? I think the greater portion of his workmen would have held their prejudices in abeyance rather than let a thirty thousand dollar job slip out of their hands. (Harper 249)

As Thomas explains it, the equation needs to be changed from having capitalism be subservient to prejudice to having prejudice be subservient to capitalism. Such a process is enacted through Thomas's carpentry skills, whose excellence demands respect from other white laborers and employers, no matter their individual prejudices. Indeed, Thomas remarks how it may appear "strange," how "some of those men who were too proud or foolish to work with him as a fellow laborer, were humble enough to work under him as a journeymen. When he was down they were ready to kick him down. When he was up they were ready to receive his helping hand" (245). Eventually it is Thomas's labor that defines him, not his skin color.

Throughout the antebellum era, black workers were continually associated with slave labor, whether or not they themselves were actually employed. *Trial and Triumph* reverses this equation, showing how by the postbellum era, outside of the context of slavery, being associated firstly with one's labor could be a good thing. Trade labor had the potential to exist outside the context of slavery, as a commodity independently valued by the capitalist market primarily for its skill, not by the skin color of the worker.

### ***Inherent Properties***

In the closing chapter of Martin Delany's *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), he summarizes his findings on the duty of the black race to elevate themselves in the most practical ways they can, arguing it is "the duty of the Free, to elevate themselves in the most speedy and effective manner possible; as the

redemption of the bondman depends entirely upon the elevation of the freeman” (Delany 218). Two sentences later, Delany employs a mechanical metaphor to drive his point home: “Let us apply, first, the lever to ourselves; and the force that elevates us to the position of manhood’s considerations and honors, will cleft the manacle of every slave in the land” (218). The “lever” in the sentence is not only representative of the trades and mechanical skills Delany argued should be sought after by free black workers, but demonstrates how mastery over the “lever” is the most effective means to both elevate the race and hasten the end of slavery.

Samuel Ringgold Ward draws a similar parallel between labor and abolition in his *Autobiography of a Fugitive Negro* (1855). Beginning with the question “What is anti-slavery labour?” and “How is this to be done?” (Ward 42), Ward asserts that the answer is “Not alone by lecturing, holding anti-slavery conventions, distributing anti-slavery tracts, maintaining anti-slavery societies, and editing anti-slavery journals” (42), all of which were common practices of abolitionists. Instead, the most powerful tool for the anti-slavery laborer is that tool applied by the skilled laborer in his daily work:

I call the expert black cordwainer, blacksmith, or other mechanic or artisan, the teacher, the lawyer, the doctor, the farmer, or the divine, an anti-slavery labourer; and in his vocation from day to day, with his hoe, hammer, pen, tongue, or lancet, he is living down the base calumnies of his heartless adversaries — he is demonstrating his truth and their falsity. (Ward 42-43)

By taking ownership of one’s own labor, finding value “in his vocation from day to day,” the black worker adamantly opposes the system of slavery that actively worked to deprive those workers of the fruits of their labor. Skilled labor not only enabled new economic and educational opportunities for free blacks, not only eased the transition from regarding oneself as a commodity to viewing one’s labor as a tradable commodity, but also, according to Josiah Henson, was necessary for the entire race to overcome the prejudice the black race found

throughout the country. By the time of his 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*, after both the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law as well as the publication of his 1853 “Learn Trades or Starve!” Frederick Douglass found a similar significance to trades and the opportunities they provide.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass shows just how crucial knowledge of a trade is in making the transition from viewing oneself as property to viewing oneself as a laborer, expressing ownership of one’s own labor. It is not that “things” don’t exist within the Northern market, but the status of “things” within the wage labor system is shifted from human bodies to acts of labor. For instance, when Douglass describes his employment at a ship-yard in New Bedford, he writes “On the wharves, I saw industry without bustle, labor without noise, and heavy toil without the whip. There was no loud singing, as in southern ports, where ships are loading or unloading—no loud cursing or swearing—but everything went on as smoothly as the works of a well adjusted machine” (Douglass, *Bondage*, 254). As a skilled laborer, Douglass’s labor exists not as a tradable commodity, but as a tool, a part of the “well adjusted machine” which could not be so easily replaced.

Douglass shows the increased economic value of this machine by comparing similar labor tasks upon wharves both in the North and the South:

In a southern port, twenty or thirty hands would have been employed to do what five or six did here [in the North], with the aid of a single ox attached to the end of a fall. Main strength, unassisted by skill, is slavery’s method of labor. An old ox, worth eighty dollars, was doing, in New Bedford, what would have required fifteen thousand dollars worth of human bones and muscles to have performed in a southern port. I found that everything was done here with a scrupulous regard to economy, both in regard to men and things, time and strength. (254)

Whereas in the South slaves are treated as things, subjected to various methods designed to extract the maximum amount of labor that is legally owed to their master, the Northern economy

treats things differently. In the North, mechanical advancements (the “ox attached to the end of a fall”) not only render labor more effective than in the South, but elicits a “scrupulous regard to economy both in regard to men and things.” The machine treats men and things equitably and fairly, blind to race and class. To Douglass, such a system “illustrate[s] the superior mental character of northern labor over that of the south” (Douglass, *Bondage*, 254). Though Northern labor periodicals such as *The Workingman’s Advocate* often derided the increasing presence of machinery in wage-labor jobs, viewing it as a threat to job stability, Douglass found unique economic opportunity, unique in the sense that the machine cannot exhibit the same types of prejudice towards Douglass that other workers often did. Douglass draws an analogy between his capacity for labor in New Bedford and the commodities his labor helps produce, as when describing his admiration for the skill and sagacity of the wage workers of the ship-repairing docks, he notes that he soon “learned that men went from New Bedford to Baltimore, and bought old ships, and brought them here to repair, and made them better and more valuable than they ever were before” (255). Douglas, who has himself just made the trip from Baltimore to New Bedford, hopes that he, too, can exhibit his skill as a laborer to transform himself from a mere thing into something “better and more valuable than ... ever before.”

Just how much that “value” Douglass was searching for amounted to, however, was a different question, one brought forth when his friends paid £150 sterling for his freedom. While Douglass tacitly consents to paying such a fee, he describes how some of his “uncompromising anti-slavery friends . . . failed to see the wisdom of this arrangement,” thinking it “a violation of anti-slavery principles—conceding a right of property in man—and a wasteful expenditure of money” (Douglass, *Bondage*, 277). Douglass, however, offers a different rationale for the payment, viewing his “liberty of more value than one hundred and fifty pounds sterling, I could

not see either a violation of the laws of morality, or those of economy, in the transaction” (277). Within this monetary exchange, Douglass keeps morality and economics distinctly separate, claiming the two should have no influence over each other, as in the end the deal was altogether agreeable to him. Whereas his anti-slavery friends forthrightly object to the payment, adhering to their moralist principles, Douglass is allowed no such luxury. When it came to the relationship between economics and African Americans, it was best to leave a discussion of ethics out of the equation, as such standards often wishfully, though falsely, positioned black workers as located fully within the free Northern economy. Instead, black workers occupied a space somewhere in between Northern and Southern capitalism, susceptible to many of the economic hardships but few of the advantages shared by both systems.



## **CHAPTER IV**

### **LABOR IN SLAVERY'S SHADOW: RACE, DISABILITY, AND POST-SLAVERY ETHICS**

*“Though we have had war, reconstruction and abolition as a nation, we still linger in the shadow and blight of an extinct institution” – Frederick Douglass (1883)*<sup>70</sup>

*“The laborer instinctively feels that something of slavery still remains, or that something of freedom is yet to come” – Ira Steward (1873)*<sup>71</sup>

Though the end of the Civil War brought an end to legalized chattel slavery within the United States, its cultural and institutional influence have continued for much longer. In the antebellum era slavery was typically relegated to the Southern states, and after its abolition the language and imagery of slavery lost some of its immediacy, viewed as a relic of the past. The postbellum era was facing its own set of problems that would eventually come to define it in the popular imagination as the Gilded Age. Taking a tour of the Southern states in 1865, seeing the massive amount of recently freed black workers, Northerner Sidney Andrews wrote in *The South Since the War* that “The labor question, and not reconstruction, is the main question among intelligent thinking men” (Andrews 101). George McNeill, a leader in the Knights of Labor movement, would strike a similar note in 1887, claiming “The problem of to-day, as of yesterday and to-morrow, is, how to establish equity between men” (McNeill 454). In the eyes of Northern labor leaders, Southern blacks had escaped chattel slavery only to enter wage slavery.

While the two concepts are fundamentally different in many ways, many postwar commentators saw some overlap between antebellum and postbellum labor, sometimes described as chattel and wage slavery.<sup>72</sup> Further, after the war many wondered to what extent, if any, the reforming and moral power of abolitionism could be harnessed and redirected towards the problems of wage labor: increasing poverty, class disparity, accidents, and the diminishing

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<sup>70</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Parties Were Made for Men, Not Men for Parties: An Address Delivered in Louisville, Kentucky, on 25 September 1883.”

<sup>71</sup> Ira Steward, qtd in Roediger, *Seizing*, 118.

<sup>72</sup> Though less popular after the Civil War, as David Roediger shows in *The Wages of Whiteness*, comparisons between wage labor and slavery still came up from time to time in labor presses and fiction.

quality of life for millions of people. Could the language and culture that had worked to bring an end to slavery similarly work to improve the lives of Northern workers? Certainly labor reformers tried, but the conflict between Northern labor and capital was imagined differently after the end of slavery, when the concept of free labor lacked its definitional opposite, slave labor, and thus no longer signified a sense of being better off.

One way that literature tried to engage the labor question, an umbrella for class and income inequality, was to implement literary strategies of benevolence. By borrowing from the genres of sentimentalism and social realism to showcase workers' lives as they were, authors such as Rebecca Harding Davis and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps sought to use literature to impart feelings of sympathy towards their oppressed subjects – industrial workers – and then to transform that sympathy into benevolent action. Texts such as *Life in the Iron Mills* and *The Silent Partner* tried to perform the same sort of cultural work for industrial labor as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* did for slavery the generation before.

In one way, my thesis for this chapter is simple: slavery continued to influence the relationship between capital and labor in the North during the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, slavery's removal from the country's newly unified legal and economic system removed the immediacy of the ways many Northerners approached reform. At the same time, David Roediger points out that these changes invigorated the organized labor movement, which "began to develop a sense that its patriotism [during the Civil War] ought to deliver a Jubilee for wage workers" (Roediger, *Seizing*, 19), that the nation owed it to the workingmen of the Union Army to reform issues facing the working-class.<sup>73</sup> Benevolence is a particularly useful model of reform to look at here, as it previously helped bring a generation of Northern middle-

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<sup>73</sup> Roediger points out that many of the original founders of Northern labor organizations had direct ties to antislavery efforts before the war.

and upper-class white women into the abolitionist cause, and leaders within the Knights of Labor as well as authors such as Davis and Phelps wondered if it could work again to the benefit of the oppressed wage laborer.

Benevolence directed at labor during the postbellum era necessarily looked different than it did in the antebellum era when directed at slavery, and this chapter argues that female authors such as Rebecca Harding Davis, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and W.H. Little (a writer involved with the Knights of Labor), use benevolence as a means of not only highlighting the differences between wage and slave labor, but also to expose how the reform methods employed by Northerners towards slaves were not so easily adaptable to aid the problems facing wage workers. Scholars often fault Davis and Phelps for what they see as their seemingly imperfect commitment to labor reform – Davis offers no discernible message or path of reform, and Phelps undercuts her reformist agenda by discouraging the workers from striking – but labor reform, I argue, is not the goal of these texts. Rather, these texts work to expose the limits of personal benevolence, highlighting its shortcomings when operating in a context at times in denial or unaware of slavery's influence. W.H. Little's *Sealskin and Shoddy* further moves the concept and practice of benevolence away from individual agency and towards institutional responsibility.

Scholars have shown how within the antebellum era benevolence was implicitly tied to racial and progressive politics. Literary texts that employed tropes of benevolence tended to follow a similar script: a narrator or other protagonist – typically a white, middle- or upper-class woman – engages in acts of kindness and concern, or benevolence, toward a slave, and through such aid the recipient is lifted out of their oppressed conditions and eventually empowered. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, when little Eva reads to Uncle Tom, or Ophelia takes charge of Topsy, these relationships are intended to impart a salvific worldview upon a member of an

oppressed group in order to enact their deliverance. In scenes such as these, acts of benevolence are performed by wealthy or otherwise powerful benefactors, thereby reinforcing an implicit distinction between the upper and lower classes. Acts of benevolence are also closely linked to racial politics, Susan Ryan explaining how in the antebellum era “blackness haunted white benevolence” and benevolence was brought about by a “collective racial guilt” shared by whites (Ryan 2). As a variety of scholars, including Ryan and Jill Bergman have discussed, scenes of white benevolence have a distinct moralizing function they impart to readers. And as Lori Ginzberg has argued, the trope serves to increase and validate the agency and social role of white middle- and upper-class women.

During the antebellum era, the slave was deemed particularly deserving of benevolence because he or she was in bondage. However, after the Civil War, the newly freed slave, supposedly able to enter the free market as an equal laborer, no longer struck the same chord of need. In the eyes of many white Northern labor advocates, like William Sylvis (leader of the National Labor Union) and Terrence V. Powderley (long-time head of the Knights of Labor), the former slave had now joined the ranks of the wage-workers, and should therefore not be given special privileges in an already oppressive, highly competitive labor system. As Frederick Douglass writes in 1883, all workers were laboring “in the shadow and blight of an extinct institution” (Douglass, “Parties,” 92).

After the war, there was a proliferation of new bodies within the workforce, the four million recently freed slaves and increasing waves of immigrants. One of the ways fiction tried to make sense of these laborers was by focusing on non-racial bodily descriptors that could be used to distinguish laborers based upon not only what kind of labor they performed or were suited for, but also to discern their moral character. In particular, increasing literary

representations of disabled laborers – made popular in part due to the Civil War and increasing rates of workplace accidents – served as a way to consolidate and address anxieties over new members of the working class by reconceiving who was deemed worthy of benevolence in a new, slavery-free economy. In Northern labor fiction such as Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills* and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Silent Partner*, the figure of the disabled laborer represents a new way of bestowing benevolence, one without an imperative to civilize or uplift the recipient, and one that ties morality with economic production. More to the point, the disabled laborer is primarily identified in these texts by bodily characteristics other than their skin color, becoming repositories for a range of anxieties over both the legacy of slavery as well as working-class oppression. These disabled bodies become a means for addressing issues of slavery without addressing issues of race.

While Davis and Phelps show the changing role of benevolence away from individual empowerment and towards socioeconomic reform, Little’s *Sealskin and Shoddy* muses on the potential for benevolence to become an institutional force. Serialized in the *Journal of United Labor*, the main organ of the Knights of Labor, the 1888 novella imagines new roles and successes for benevolence through the form of profit-sharing corporations.

Each of the texts I analyze bears a peripheral relationship to the institution or legacy of slavery itself. In *Life in the Iron Mills*, one of the visitors to the factory, Mitchell, is visiting in order to “study the institutions of the South” (Davis 29). Phelps’s “The Tenth of January” and *The Silent Partner* take place in actual and imagined textile factories in Massachusetts, factories historically dependent for their operations upon slave-grown Southern cotton. Likewise, *Sealskin and Shoddy* describes a variety of textile factories in Cincinnati.

Race appears in these texts in strange, subtle ways. However, both within the texts and the criticism on them, issues of race are often swept aside, seen as incidental to the problems of wage labor. The marginalization of race, I argue, is the strongest critique these texts make of the contemporary reform movements. The stories make the point that the legacy of slavery continues to affect the relationship between Northern labor and capital and ignoring that, or trying to simply replicate the reformist strategies directed towards the abolition of slavery within the context of workers' rights, will result in failure: failure to properly understand the issues, failures of conscience, and failures of progress within the reform movement. The literary texts I look at in this chapter each wrestle with the role of benevolence within slavery's shadow, questioning what, if any, analogues can be drawn between the issues facing what many labor advocates described as wage slavery and the chattel slavery that benevolence had aided in abolishing a short time before. Ultimately, these texts remove the individual imperative from benevolence's innately hierarchical and class-based structure, replacing it with a more equitable, institutional imperative, positing benevolence less as a relationship between individuals and more between parties with shared interests, interests these texts and the labor movement strived to prove the need for corporate institutions to be equally invested in.

### ***Unsanctioned Benevolence***

By the time Rebecca Harding Davis published *Life in the Iron Mills*, the Civil War had already begun. Slavery might be in its final throes, but what about the institutions and laborers whose patterns were also shaped by slavery's norms, but were located outside the plantation,

such as the iron mills of Virginia?<sup>74</sup> In *Life*, Davis explores what role benevolence might play in improving the lives of industrial wage workers who, though affected by the institution of slavery, were not its primary victims. Slavery occupies both a central and peripheral position within this novella: central in the imagery used to represent industrial labor, peripheral in that the laborers are racially white. The figures who hold positions of influence within the text (the narrator and the capitalists who visit the factory) either struggle to find a way to meaningfully improve or affect the lives of the workers, or are otherwise uninterested. Within *Life*'s fictional town, modes of benevolence fail to bring about aid or even a proper understanding of the lives and hardships of these white wage workers.

In a perversion of the ways industrial spaces sought to manufacture anesthetized and picturesque depictions of the surrounding landscape, as discussed in chapter two, the narrator here likens the mass of mill employees to aspects of the natural landscape, particularly the “negro-like river” the narrator watches from her window, “slavishly bearing its burden day after day” (Davis 12). Much like the river, the narrator looks upon “the slow stream of human life creeping past” her window on their way to the mills. What makes the river’s description peculiar is not just the usage of the term “negro-like,” but that this quality originates not from any innate or inherent trait but rather from the labor that it performs and to which it is subjected. Indeed, the river is imagined to shift from being “negro-like” to an eventual state of felicity: “What if it be stagnant and slimy here? It knows that beyond there waits for it odorous sunlight,—quaint old gardens, dusky with soft, green foliage of apple-trees, and flushing crimson with roses,—air, and

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<sup>74</sup> No specific town or state name is given in the novella. However, Davis based her stories on her experiences living near the iron mills in Wheeling, Virginia (West Virginia since 1863). Further suggesting the unnamed town is within the South is that at one point Davis describes one of the visitors to the mill, Mitchell, as “a stranger in the city,—spending a couple of months in the border of a Slave State, to study the institutions of the South” (Davis 29). For more on the influence of Davis’s experiences in Wheeling to her writing of *Life in the Iron Mills*, see Tillie Olsen’s “A Biographical Interpretation” in the *Feminist Press* edition of the text.



fields, and mountains” (13). Eventually, the “negro-like” qualities of the river – its forced and burdensome labor – will be shed as it moves forward both geographically and temporally (much as the Civil War, then being fought, would bring an eventual end to slavery). The blackness that envelops the landscape and laborers alike is produced as a result from the iron-works, which churns out smoke that “settles down in black, slimy pools on the muddy streets” (11) and even seeps into the narrator’s home, covering the wings of the broken angel figurine she had placed on the mantel, symbolizing the lack of Christian influence upon the working conditions of the town’s laborforce.

Blackness, in this place, is not a mere physical coating, but an absorbable and altering trait. Once the workers come in contact with the smoke and the “black, slimy pools,” they find their “skin and muscle and flesh begrimed with smoke and ashes” as they breath “from infancy to death an air saturated with fog and grease and soot, vileness for soul and body” (Davis 12). The mill-workers, like the river and the slave, become unwilling subjects to the will of their proprietors, whose “vileness” deforms the bodies of the workers and the land: the workers are physically transformed, their faces, skin, and muscles bearing the results of their labor, while the river with its changed color and altered current grows weary of the weight it constantly bears. Though the laborers remain racially white, the blackness they are constantly covered in – from the soot, smoke, and ashes – becomes symbolic of their oppressive laboring conditions and the physical and spiritual degradation they experience as a result.

These representations of physical blackness draw attention to issues of slavery and race, highlighting how oppression cannot be properly addressed or represented if the influence of slavery is ignored. Amy Lang claims in *The Syntax of Class* that Davis’s “Brief—even casual . . . association of chattel and wage slave in the figure of the river and the narrator’s repudiation of

that figure are enormously instructive, acknowledging as they do the failure of ‘fancy’ to suggest even an imaginative solution to the problem of wage slavery” (Lang 76). Besides the river, it is also worth noting the ethnicities of the workers, Welsh and Irish. Lang explains that the “negro-like river” thus also intends to invoke “the ambiguous racial status of the working-class immigrant” (76). The marginal presence of slavery, according to Lang, contributes to what Davis views as an artistic inability to properly represent Hugh and the other iron workers, stymieing Hugh’s development into a fully realized figure who “eludes sentimental representation” (72). And whereas Lang sees this primarily as a problem of artistic representation, it is also a problem of trying to employ literary benevolence to persons other than slaves within the context of slavery. Indeed, it is especially important to call attention to the date of *Life*, 1861, when the war over slavery’s continued existence was already underway. Roediger argues in *The Wages of Whiteness* that “the Civil War and emancipation removed the ability of white workers to derive satisfaction from defining themselves as ‘not slaves’ and called into question self-definitions that centered on being ‘not Black’” (Roediger, *Wages*, 170). Already, in *Life*, we can see the comparison beginning to break down, as the workers of the iron mills are literally covered in blackness, a coating their whiteness has no influence over. Thus, what Lang sees as a failure of class permeability in representations of the iron workers, I argue is a failure because of the narrator’s assumption that whiteness itself provides some sort of inherent value to labor. Whiteness, Davis suggests, is malleable and corruptible within the context of slavery.

For all of the hardship and oppression that Hugh experiences, the capitalist and would-be-philanthropist visitors to the mill locate him within the cultural narrative of the great white man, viewing Hugh’s hardships not due to the industrialist system he is a part of, but as evidence of his own individual failings. Because Hugh is a white man and shows promising if unrefined skill

in artistry, his life of drudgery confounds the capitalists. Deborah's hardships make sense to the visitors: she is disabled, "deformed," and a woman, already victim to the industrial forces beyond her control. Hugh's hardships, however, are less easily attributable to any physical differences. Hugh, in the eyes of the mill proprietors, is squandering a talent that would make him "a great man" (Davis 37). "Do you know, boy," asks Doctor May, "you have it in you to be a great sculptor, a great man?—do you understand? ... to live a better, stronger life than I, or Mr. Kirby here? A man may make himself anything he chooses. God has given you stronger powers than many men,—me, for instance'" (37). To Doctor May and Mitchell (two men of the visiting party), the real injustice is that Hugh is squandering his talents, where proper use would guarantee a life of greatness. Yet Hugh is denied assistance by the capitalists even after they laud how much it would help him, saying they have not the means and that bestowing such aid would be unconscionable. When Mitchell is asked directly if he will provide assistance to Hugh, he responds that "it would be of no use. I am not one of them [the workers]" (38). Pushed to explain, Mitchell elaborates: "Yes, I mean just that. Reform is born of need, not pity" (39). Hugh's redemption, his economic uplift and empowerment, is framed by the accumulation of money, of capital, of property, all things that are denied to him by the visiting capitalists, both by the low wages they pay Hugh for his labor in their mill and their refusal to impart charitable aid. When Deborah steals money from one of the visitors, she traverses the space between the philosophical discussion of individual empowerment that the capitalists have among themselves and the material realities that could assure such conditions for class uplift.

These competing visions for individual empowerment – the ideology that one need only take advantage of one's natural abilities (Hugh's whiteness, maleness, and artistic skill) and direct monetary aid (the money Deborah steals) – intersect most dramatically in the figure of the

korl woman. Created by Hugh out of pig iron, the refuse resulting from the process of refining iron ore into a commodity, the statue not only “eludes sentimental representation,” as Lang says of Hugh, but eludes discernible meaning, confounding the visitors, Hugh, and the narrator.

Described as “hideous” (Davis 24) and “ungainly” (64) by the narrator, the woman is nevertheless “A working woman,—the very type of her class” (32). The class issues she represents come to eventually occupy a similarly marginal position as the “negro-like river,” but whereas the river drifts along to shed its bonds, Davis struggles to find the language or sympathies with which to engage or even understand the problems the korl woman represents. To the capitalists, the woman is frightening, with an “eager face, like that of a starving wolf’s” (32), and though they grasp at the intention and significance of the artistry, May eventually demands “Why? . . . What does the fellow intend by the figure? I cannot catch the meaning” (32). Putting the question of meaning to Hugh, he responds that “She be hungry” (33), the significance of which the visitors interpret on a literal, rather than metaphorical, level.

What so confounds the capitalist visitors about the korl woman is that she exists outside of the industrialist structure they recognize, benefit from, and wholly endorse. The statue exists outside of the intentions and purpose of the industrial system, simultaneously refusing commodified status and yet crafted from pig iron, a byproduct essential to the production of iron goods. The statue also exists outside of the structure of the sentimental narrative, wherein readers are led to believe they can in some way positively alter the korl woman’s condition, to improve the life of the “working woman.” Indeed, by the end of the novella, the statue occupies only a corner of the narrator’s library, usually kept behind a curtain. The korl woman can sometimes gaze upon the narrator’s world, but removing the curtain that covers it happens only in brief, fleeting moments, and the woman is thus unable to be fully brought into the light of

understanding. The statue is thus a metonym not just for the working class, but for that class of workers whose working conditions are affected by slavery, but whom nobody knows quite how to help while slavery is still a problem.

For Davis individual benevolence is a dead end, as useless as the advice the capitalists give to Hugh. And when the means of uplift are taken by the workers into their own hands, they are punished for it. To remove the literal and metaphorical blackness from these workers, they do not need individual benevolent aid, but class reform, not only to have their working conditions improved, but to increase understanding between the workers and the capitalists. Class reform is much more difficult, for it disrupts the modes of industrial production, exists outside of the capitalist structure that sustains both the industrial economy as well as class distinctions. In *Life*, Davis questions to what extent, if any, benevolence can be employed to enact such reform. This very question is posed by Dr. May: “Why should one be raised, when myriads are left?” (Davis 37). But whereas May and the other visitors think that money is the primary means of elevating the workers, the solution to the problem, the korl woman occupies a position where money has no impact. What the korl woman is hungry for is not money, but understanding. As long as slavery continues to exert its influence over industrial labor and class relations – even if that influence goes relatively unacknowledged and unremarked – individual benevolent aid will affect little positive change in the lives of oppressed wage laborers.

### ***Deviant Labor***

If Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills* questions the role of benevolence within a setting that operates in slavery’s shadow, the text is nonetheless informed by the Christian moralism that nineteenth-century benevolence depended upon. Davis’s narrator frequently intervenes, at times

admonishing the reader for their lack of understanding, and the Quaker woman who eventually takes care of Deborah represents a standard of morality that is absent from the iron mills. Even if it fails to institute or affect any broader change, the ending encounter between Deborah and the Quaker woman follows a familiar script of benevolence, as the Quaker woman uses her influence to improve the life of Deborah, the poor fallen woman. In “The Tenth of January,” however, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps shows how this script can be emptied of both power and meaning if the supposed benefactor lacks a firm and guiding set of moral principles. Sene, the story’s disabled protagonist, rejects the narrative of benevolence being imposed upon her by persons whose motivation is not ethical but merely self-interested, challenging the motivations of benevolent actions and exposing their potential for failure within the context of labor and class relations.

Sene has several things in common with Deborah from *Life*, including being described as disabled, as “hunchback[s],” and also sharing a contested romance with men they work with, Hugh and Dick, respectively.<sup>75</sup> The plot is driven along by a love triangle between Sene, described throughout as ugly and crippled; Dick, the man engaged to Sene but secretly in love with Del; and Del, the pretty, able-bodied mill girl secretly in love with Dick. Sene discovers Dick and Del’s secret attraction and struggles with whether or not she should break off the engagement and allow them to be together, for she believes that Dick, out of pity, will fulfill his obligations to her. Torn between being the perpetual object of Dick’s pity, which Sene imagines to be because of her physical ailments – her hunched back and scarred face are mentioned, and she frequently describes herself as “crippled,” physical scars that resulted from abuse by her

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<sup>75</sup> It is worth pointing out that Phelps declared a “sense of personal indebtedness” to Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills*. In “Stories That Stay,” a 1910 essay for *Century Magazine*, Phelps commented on her longtime friend Davis and the influence *Life* had on her own writing: “That story was a distinct crisis for one young writer at the point where the intellect and the moral nature meet. It was never possible after reading it to ignore. One could never say again that one did not understand. The claims of toil and suffering upon ease had assumed a new form. For me they assumed a force which perhaps it is not too much to say, has never let me go” (Phelps qtd. in Harris 308).

alcoholic mother – and committing herself to a life of loveless and friendless solitude by enabling the union between Dick and Del, Sene finds herself repeatedly contemplating suicide.

Difficulties associated with her disability aside – such as depression and social ostracism – what Sene cannot stand is being an object of Dick’s pity. Sene’s worries over Dick’s feelings should not be read as a lover’s jealousy, as the text ascribes to Dick’s love material and spiritual changes. Or, rather, marriage to Dick would provide Del with material and spiritual improvement. Questioned by Sene after she witnesses a secret meeting between her and Dick, Del tells Sene “He makes me feel like saying my prayers, too, he’s so good! Besides, I want to be married. I hate the mill. I hate to work. I’d rather be taken care of,—a sight rather” (Phelps, “Tenth,” 322). Sene can imagine a similar future for Del, outside of the mill, as she muses: “it’s no wonder they love her. I’d love her if I was a man: so pretty! so pretty! She’s just good for nothing, Del is;—would let the kitchen fire go out, and wouldn’t mend the baby’s aprons; but I’d love her all the same; marry her, probably, and be sorry all my life” (318). For Sene, however, marriage to Dick, if it were to ever happen, would likely continue on in the same way it had for the past two years since Dick began living with her and her father, with both of them continuing to work in the factory.<sup>76</sup> After witnessing this meeting, wherein Del, not knowing Sene had recognized Dick as the clandestine lover, tells Sene that “He’ll never break his engagement, not even for me; he’s sorry for her, and all that. I think it’s too bad” (322), Sene increasingly feels as if she is inhibiting Dick’s happiness at the cost of her own, and mentally repeats Del’s words, that “He’s sorry for her, and all that.” Sene’s status as pitiable object is emphasized by a

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<sup>76</sup> Though Thomas Dublin details in *Women at Work* how factory work was relatively uncommon for married women, and then only temporary, my reading relies on the fact that Dick continues to put off the marriage, seldom speaking of it and having “not urged it” in the time since his proposal over a year ago (Davis 317). In addition, whenever Sene imagines a married life with Dick, she envisions repetition of their current actions.

conversation she has with Dick where she intends to break off the engagement but cannot go through with it:

“You make it so hard! You’ve no right to make it so hard! It ain’t as if you loved me, Dick! I know I’m not like other girls! Go home and let me be!”

But Dick drew her arm through his, and led her gravely away. “I like you well enough, Asenath,” he said, with that motherly pity in his eyes; “I’ve always liked you. So don’t let us have any more of this.” (Phelps, “Tenth,” 335)

Sene again delays breaking off the engagement, and instead resolves to go through with it the next day, when the mill collapses.

Though no wealthy benefactors or benefactresses appear in “Tenth” to bestow benevolent aid upon any of the characters, the prospect of marriage does offer the possibility of socioeconomic change, though only for Del. For Del, marriage to Dick offers escape from the mill and into the home, wherein she can more fully inhabit the cultural tenets of “true womanhood.” Marriage thus offers for Del what would be viewed by many as an improvement in conditions. Representative of the stereotypical white female wage worker, Del is positioned so as to have her life improved through marriage. For Sene, however, marriage offers no such improvement; marriage will certainly make her life more comfortable and happy, though it will not remove her physical disabilities, and thus she feels as if she will always be an object of pity in Dick’s eyes. Viewed as a pitiable object, similar to the image of the slave laborer, marriage for Sene changes from an act of love to an act of imagined benevolence.

Sene decides to break this script. She will break the engagement herself not because she does not relish the idea of marriage to Dick, but because she refuses to inhabit the subjected position of pitiable object under the guise of a relationship that Dick imagines will improve her lot in life. The collapse of the Pemberton Mills while she is at work renders her decision to break



her engagement all the more dramatic, resulting in Sene's death.<sup>77</sup> Given a choice to let either herself or Del be saved, Sene chooses Del, fully assured of Del and Dick's union. After her escape, Del runs into the arms of Dick, and "The love which he had fought so long broke free of barrier in that hour" (Phelps, "Tenth," 348). The antebellum fantasy of women working in the factories only until they find a suitable husband is reinforced by the closing union of Dick and Del, and Del is offered the social mobility that marriage entails for a single factory worker. Sene thus rejects the offered script of benevolence in which marriage itself is an act of charity.

Sene's death preserves not only the ideal of a normative domesticity, but of one that is racially pure. Indeed, Sene's identity is non-normative within the white working-class not only because of her disability, but by contrast with the other female workers. She is routinely contrasted to the able-bodied, normative, and racially pure Del Ivory throughout the text, whose very name implies her racial prestige. In addition, each of the other women Sene sees die in the mills are either immigrants themselves or descended from immigrants whose own racial status and purity are in question: Meg Match and a child named Molly (common names for Irish women), "One of the pretty Irish girls" (Phelps, "Tenth," 344), and a Scotch girl. The mill's collapse thus operates as a sort of *deus ex machina*, ensuring the continuation of a normative, white working-class. This turn of events follows the larger cultural view towards disabled bodies within this time period as well, since according to Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell, "this period in American history is the first to introduce disability as disruptive to rationales of

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<sup>77</sup> Phelps was a child in nearby Andover when the Pemberton Mills actually did collapse in 1860, a moment that greatly affected her. Stephanie C. Palmer, in *Together by Accident*, explores the various ways and reasons that accidents such as this became a favorite trope for Phelps to employ in her fiction, as they allowed her to "create a textual space for cross-class intimacy in which social problems are solved through spoken agreements between equalized actors in places characterized by moving people, ideas, and capital" (Palmer 119). Though such a lens, one could read Sene's parting words to Del ("Go, Del, and tell him I sent you with my dear love, and that it's all right" (Phelps, "Tenth," 348) in a similar light. The fire that spreads on the ruins provides enough time to save only one of them, thereby placing Sene and Del, for once, on equal grounds. Sene's martyrdom also tacitly solves the social problems between herself, Dick, and Del.

national citizenship” (Snyder and Mitchell 39), rationales that included one’s ability to fully participate in the capitalist economy. Disabilities, Snyder and Mitchell continue to explain, were believed to prevent one’s access to various social and civic identities and privileges. In Sene’s case, her presence disrupts normative narratives of class belonging as well.

Thus Sene becomes a repository for anxieties over both the legacy of slavery and working-class oppression, her disabilities containing these anxieties within one body, ultimately excised from the laboring group. Sene’s disability becomes, then, not so much a marker of her capacity for labor – she is able to labor fine – but of her desired membership within the working-class. Disabilities in the industrial era brought to mind both the loss of autonomy and a culture of dependency, similar to how Northerners imagined life to be under slavery. Representations of disability during this time period then should not be seen as “marker[s] of inferiority,” Snyder and Mitchell claim, “but rather as representing an array of maligned differences akin to other socially denigrated communities” (Snyder and Mitchell 74). Rosemarie Garland Thomson makes a similar point, arguing that disabled bodies represented a distinct “form of ethnicity” (Thomson 6) in American culture, and even if they were not explicitly racialized, Douglas Baynton describes how “By the mid-nineteenth century, nonwhite races were routinely connected to people with disabilities” (Baynton 36), making the groups often share social categorizations. “Constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance,” Thomson argues, “the physically disabled body becomes a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control, and identity” (Thomson 6). Within the context of labor relations, we should also add race. Even if the disabled body invoked a rhetoric and imagery of race, Phelps removes these categories from the community of workers through the mill’s collapse, thus restoring an earlier racially pure and paternalistic class.

“The Tenth of January” retreats from reform and ends on the sentimental not in order to mobilize the audience into feelings of sympathy or awareness of the plight of the working-class, but in order to expose the ways that fixation on a white, normative workforce consolidates issues of worker oppression and discrimination onto those bodies for whom no clear path of reform exists. Instead, these workers are being sacrificed or martyred, a common way of treating disabled bodies, Baynton tells, because of their inability to contribute to “evolutionary progress,” or, in this case, socioeconomic progress. Slavery continues to exert its influence over “The Tenth of January” and the workers therein in subtle ways, and Phelps demonstrates the failure of benevolence to enact any tangible reform when slavery’s influence upon workers’ lives is barely acknowledged, let alone recognized.

The institutional influence and presence of slavery is not much more visible in *The Silent Partner* (1871), yet Phelps in this later novel deploys a more traditional narrative of benevolence to show how it can work to further obfuscate slavery’s lasting influence over class relations and upon the relations between labor and capital. Scholars writing about *The Silent Partner* cannot quite agree on whether or not Perley Kelso (the novel’s protagonist) is progressive or not, whether in the end she helps labor relations or undercuts any reform agenda contained within the novel. In particular, Perley’s actions in the chapter “Maple Leaves,” when she persuades the workers to end their strike, are often pointed to by scholars as undercutting any reform agenda of the novel.<sup>78</sup> But where many scholars see Perley’s actions as a failure of her character, a violation of her moral code, I argue the failure arises through Perley’s adherence to a form of

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<sup>78</sup> Judith Fetterley argues that Perley’s actions here amount to “an acquiescence in which she goes so far as to become an agent of the voice of oppression—violat[ing] her own painfully acquired insights. More seriously, however, it violates her morality” (Fetterley 26-27). Susan Albertine describes this scene as “the most disturbing scene of the novel” (Albertine 244), viewing Perley as sacrificing her moral standards to demonstrate her business acumen.

benevolence that is incompatible with the issues facing the workers of Five Falls.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, that Perley undercuts her own message of reform is precisely the point, for Phelps shows that the sort of aristocratic benevolence of the antebellum era cannot fully encapsulate or fix the variety of social issues affecting the relationship between labor and capital.<sup>80</sup>

The plot of the novel shows a wealthy benefactress, Perley Kelso, who after the sudden death of her father stands to inherit her father's partnership in the local Hayle & Kelso mill of the fictional New England town of Five Falls. Edged out of an official stake in the mill, Perley directs her attentions towards providing help for the town's workers, whose poor laboring and living conditions she becomes aware of only after her father's passing. Throughout the novel, Perley attempts to use her wealth and influence to improve the lives of the mill's employees (building libraries, establishing schools, and holding social events), but for all her good will, she is told she will never really be able to understand the problems of labor, that her good will can only go so far. This reprimand is voiced by Sip, a protagonist who works in the mill but can

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<sup>79</sup> Jill Bergman sees Phelps's theory of benevolence as informed primarily by notions of maternity, what she calls "motherly benevolence" (Bergman 196). According to Bergman, "Her notion of motherly benevolence, not surprisingly, shares many of the characteristics that domestic ideology attributed to mothering. It takes the form of caring and nurturing. It is instinctual; women are naturally equipped for it" (Bergman 196). Of additional importance to Phelps's notions of "motherly benevolence" is that it does not require the "training and preparation" that other "organized and professional" aid societies required and which, as Bergman relates, Phelps often disagreed with (194). Bergman's argument thus limits Phelps's vision of benevolent relationships primarily to those between individuals. See Bergman's "'Oh the Poor Women!': Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's Motherly Benevolence," in *Our Sisters' Keepers*.

<sup>80</sup> Though not focused on Perley's acts of benevolence, Caroline Field Levander comes to a similar conclusion in *Voices of the Nation*, arguing that Phelps critiques the aristocratic lens through which reformers often viewed members of the oppressed classes, arguing that "Perley's activism, unlike that of other middle-class women reformers, acknowledges rather than erases or vilifies wage-earning women's experience and thereby offers a departure from the labor reform practices by bourgeois women throughout the 1870s" (Levander 116). A contemporary 1871 review of *The Silent Partner*, published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, similarly noticed the novel's lack of a reformist message, praising that it tries not "to propose any legislative or politico-economical solution to the perplexing problem of labor and capital, but to contribute to something indirectly to its solution by showing that 'hands' have hearts and by awakening for them a living sympathy as living men and women" (qtd. in Laura Smith's "Textile Mills and the Political Economy of Domestic Womanhood in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' *The Silent Partner*," 192).

never get ahead because she constantly needs to devote special time and attention to her younger, disabled sister Catty.

Although Catty has been disabled since birth, Sip attributes her disabilities to their parents' victimization at the hands of industrial capitalism. In the town where Sip and her parents lived before Five Falls (where Catty was born), her mother was at work in a mill where they were "running extra time" during the late stages of her pregnancy. "They were running fourteen hours a day," Sip tells Perley, and her mother "worked till a Saturday night, and Catty was born on a Monday morning. Father came off his drunk Sunday . . . but Catty was born deaf. Father did fly round pretty well that Sunday night, and maybe it helped. . . . But Catty was born deaf . . . and — queer, and dumb, you know" (Phelps, *Silent*, 52). In Sip's mind, Catty's disabilities are a direct result and manifestation of the various oppressions her parents had experienced in the mills. Her mother attributes Catty's disabilities more directly to the extra time she spent in the factory, to "The noise of the wheels. [Catty's mother] said they beat about in her head. She come home o' nights, and says to herself, 'The baby'll never hear in this world unless she hears the wheels'; and sure enough . . . Catty hears the wheels; but never anything besides'" (96-97). After their parents die, Sip is left as Catty's only remaining family and caretaker, a duty which she performs admirably, but which costs her time away from the mill. That Perley is shocked by all this, and exclaims that "such things . . . do not often happen in our New England factories!" (52) illustrates her naiveté of the conditions of capitalism.

Catty's disabilities (deafness, muteness, and increasing blindness) continue to worsen throughout her life, until her eventual death in a flood – a scene in which various town members yell and plead for Catty to move to safety in voices she is unable to hear. When Perley pays for Catty to have a visit to the doctor, the doctor diagnoses Catty as completely blind, a condition

she had had to a lesser extent throughout her life, but which is exacerbated by her labor in the mill. This condition, the doctor explains, is fairly common to wool-pickers: “There’s a disease of the hands those people acquire from wool-picking sometimes; an ugly thing. The girl rubbed her eyes, I suppose. The mischief has been a long time in progress, or she might have stood a chance, which gaslight-work has killed, to be sure; but there’s none for her here, none!” (Phelps, *Silent*, 186). And while that is the medical explanation for her disease, Sip makes subtle insinuations at other times as to Catty’s moral character, as in when she tells Perley how worried she gets over her younger sister when she doesn’t return home: “Catty’s queer, don’t you see? She runs away, don’t you see? Sometimes she drinks, don’t you understand? Drinks herself the dead kind. That ain’t so often. Most times she just runs away about streets. There’s sometimes she does — worse” (84). The implication behind the “worse” is prostitution and sexual deviance, and Sip tells Perley “there ain’t one of my own kind of folks, your age, wouldn’t have understood half an hour ago” (84). Catty’s disabilities thus equally affect her body and her soul, rendering her as victim to what the narrator describes as a “world of exhausted and corrupted body, of exhausted and corrupted brain, of exhausted and corrupted soul” (277). In addition, Rosemarie Garland Thomson points out how the animalistic physical descriptions of Catty suggest her racial inferiority, and Sara Britton Goodling more poignantly notes that her bodily descriptions closely resemble the “handicapped African American man” of P.T. Barnum’s “What is It?” exhibit (Goodling 12).

Catty’s disabled body thus, Thomson claims, “elicits [Sip and Perley’s] devotion and emphasizes their power” (Thomson 99). But any such influence is swept away, along with Catty, by the flood. Her disabilities contribute to her death – her confusion and inability to hear any of the warnings to get off the bridge or the approaching swell that destroys the bridge – and thus, in

the end, Catty “succumbs” to “the liabilities of the body” (99), as Thomson argues. With Catty’s death, as with Sene’s, the most visible representation of class, physical, and racial disparity within the town are removed. While such a death could appear as an artistic cop-out for Phelps, removing a character for whom no clear path forward exists, she turns the scene into a spectacle, much like the collapse of the Pemberton Mills, in which the whole community (laborers and mill-owners alike), bear witness to Catty’s death. Along the banks of the river over which the bridge spans are gathered “Masses of men, women, and children [who] hung, chained like galley-slaves, to either bank” (Phelps, *Silent*, 275). While Catty’s death may appear to remove non-normative bodies from the workforce, Phelps shows that the “galley-slaves” who remain will be no better off for it, no less improved or unified.

For unlike in “The Tenth of January,” the remaining community does not become unified or consolidated through Catty’s death. Instead, there are a number of other physical or ethnic distinctions and disabilities that continue to segregate and classify the remaining workers. Sip has a constant “dreadful sore-throat” that “comes from sucking filling through the shuttle” (Phelps, *Silent*, 81). Sip and Perley watch at night as “Women with peculiar bleached yellow faces passed by. They had bright eyes. They looked like beautiful moving corpses; as if they might be the skeletons among the statues that were dug against the face of day” (119). “Cotton-weavers,” Sip explains to Perley, “You can tell a weaver by the skin” (120). Such physical differences, much as with the iron workers in Davis’s *Life in the Iron Mills*, are associated with each person’s work. Within theories on eugenics, disability was used as a rationale to invalidate claims to citizenship and personhood, Snyder and Mitchell discussing how “arguments about the ability to labor were . . . [used to invalidate] people with disabilities on the basis of their failed labor skills. The Marxist or class-based argument bemoaned disability as a stripping of capacity

from the body by excessive labor demands; rising levels of worker disability thus provided a reliable indicator of the corruption of capital” (Snyder and Mitchell 15). While the narrator in *The Silent Partner* views Catty as having been fully corrupted by industrial capitalism, many of the other workers in the town bear similar bodily markings. Catty’s death is thus less a process of removing non-desirable or non-normative characteristics from the body of the working-class, and more of a forewarning of a similar fate awaiting those “galley-slaves” who can do nothing but stand idly by and watch. Phelps shows that the attitude of difference Roediger claims in *Wages* acted so forcefully upon the consciousness of the white working-class, namely the ability to define themselves as “not slaves” or as being “not Black” (Roediger, *Wages*, 170), is a difference effected not by skin color, but by time spent laboring within the system of industrial capitalism.

New categories of laborers are created within the town of Five Falls as the industrial economy segregates its employees into various occupations and, implicitly, into different ethnic groups. Sip herself is repeatedly described as “brown” throughout the novel, a detail that Amy Lang says is meant to signify her enslavement, that her “dark skin is made explicable by the debate over class harmony” (Lang 89). According to the ideology of free labor, Lang writes, socioeconomic mobility for these various ethnic groups of Five Falls is only possible through “social revolution or benevolent intervention on the part of the powerful” (89), namely Perley. Lang sees such mobility as ultimately impossible within the novel, and, building on Lang, I argue this point is dramatically driven home by Catty’s death. At once representative of the worst of the physical and intellectual corruption that can befall the workers of Five Falls, the most regressive and othered status they can inhabit, Catty’s excision from the community shows Perley the ultimate ineptitude of her benevolent aid, how all her influence is unable to reach and affect the broader sources of oppression and corruption that exist within the industrialist system.



The failure of Perley's benevolent actions are not just to show that upward social mobility is impossible, as Lang claims, but are meant to highlight the fact that the working-class is under constant threat of *downward* mobility. Perley's benevolence fails because it proves too rigid, unable to adapt to the changing composition of the town's body of laborers.

Similar Wendy Sharer's argument in "'Going into Society' or 'Bringing Society In'?: Rhetoric and Problematic Philanthropy in *The Silent Partner*," Perley's benevolent actions fail to address "the critical material conditions or the larger economic systems that undergird" (Sharer 174) class relations within Five Falls, and they similarly fail to address the racial issues that accommodate those class relations. Race operates in Perley's mind as only a subsidiary of class relations, bodily markers that become consolidated within Catty's disabled body. Because of such a myopic view she believes that efforts to elevate the working class, such as giving them culture and education, will result in dramatic changes in their lives and working conditions.<sup>81</sup> Even if they do, however, Catty's death and the frequent intervention of figures described in racial codes within the novel remind both Perley and the reader that there are other forms of segregation and oppression that arise out of the factory system, forms that Perley cannot ever fully understand and can ultimately do nothing to change on her own.

Sip is the only one who can enact reform, and it comes from within the working class, not from members of the middle or upper classes like Perley. And reform occurs because only Sip directly confronts the influence of race and the legacy of slavery, issues made manifest through Catty's disabilities. Perley's benevolence – and the racial and class privileges she enjoys – demonstrate what Thomson calls "benevolent maternalism," a literary device used "in order to mobilize and validate social reform agendas" by expressing care towards the disabled person in order to "define and legitimize the normalized, gendered role of the maternal benefactress that

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<sup>81</sup> For more on the particular failures of this model of philanthropy, see Sharer's essay.

[*The Silent Partner*] promote[s] for women of the emerging middle class, who were marginalized within the changing social order” (Thomson 17-18). In the end, though, Phelps exposes how such a position is ultimately unable to affect change on a broader level, and thus is not as valuable as such benefactresses like Perley would have themselves believe.

Perley can use her influence to enact material and quantifiable changes among the town’s workforce, such as building libraries and organizing entertaining events, but as she herself admits at the end, she can never fully understand the problems of the community, can never fully have a voice as influential as one of their own. Instead, the position of real influence is reserved for Sip, who becomes a street preacher after Catty’s death, advocating “a poor folks’ religion” (Phelps, *Silent*, 296) with an anti-capitalist message.<sup>82</sup> After watching one of these sermons, Sip discusses the scene with Fly, a woman of society, who remarks that “They listened to her . . . They looked as if they needed it,” and Perley replies, quietly, “There are few things that they do not need . . . We do not quite understand that, I think — we who never need” (301). According to Levander, this moment “highlights the unavoidable limits of Perley’s ability to dissociate herself from the gender ideology defining her class in order to reform labor,” a class ideology that Levander claims depends upon certain moral standards for its maintenance, such as sexual purity, which are violated by the working class, thus exposing Perley’s limits of understanding and empathy (Levander 115). In other words, Perley is unable to institute broader reform because she is unable to escape her class. Perley’s benevolent acts throughout the text are similarly limited. As Phelps presents it, the granting and delivery of social and economic uplift for the workers of Five Falls will not come about through the benevolence of the wealthy, but will only

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<sup>82</sup> Sip’s credibility in this role is augmented by her years as Catty’s caretaker, as Snyder and Mitchell explain how within the capitalist economy of the nineteenth century the dependency of disabled persons offered “productive participants—a benefactor class—leverage in the social performance of beneficence” (Snyder and Mitchell 46). Sip uses such leverage not to increase her social standing, however, but to increase the influence of her message of reform within the working community.

arise organically, through moments of benevolence between members of the laboring classes themselves, who are better able to understand their collective sources of oppression.

### ***Institutional Benevolence***

In “The Tenth of January” and *The Silent Partner*, the disabled body worries Northern laborers because it signifies an inability to fully integrate with or be productive in the workforce, bringing to mind memory of the slave, racially and economically different and segregated from the wage labor workforce. Authors like Davis and Phelps wondered what was the proper moral system, or proper set of actions, with which to approach the very same issues that the disabled body represented: dependency, immorality, lack of economic productivity, and “otherness” within the post-slavery economy. Such questions were of broader interest to the labor movement more generally, which, in many ways, had emerged from the antislavery movement of only a generation ago and whose members wondered about the extent to which their reform methods and beliefs could simply be transplanted from one movement to another. But whereas Davis and Phelps point to the inability or failures of well-meaning individuals to properly understand or improve the issues facing the oppressed members of the working classes, labor reform groups like the National Labor Union and the Knights of Labor saw in institutions the potential to enact broad socioeconomic reform. Reforming the institution of capitalism itself by making capital recognize that its interests were aligned with those of the workers required a new model of benevolence, one that worked towards the mutual benefit and uplift of both parties, whose goal was not merely socioeconomic mobility, but a raising of socioeconomic standards.

In W.H. Little’s *Our Sealskin and Shoddy* (1888), Little reorganizes industrial relations in such a manner, installing a profit-sharing model of capitalism that works to the mutual benefit of

both labor and capital. Such institutional reform, Little posits, is the logical outgrowth of the benevolence that had taken root in the antislavery movement. As David Roediger shows in *Seizing Freedom*, the increased growth and support for the labor movement during the postbellum era was a direct outgrowth of the antislavery movement's successes before the Civil War, and Little imagines how a similar model can operate not between members of different classes, but among social and ethical equals.

Published serially in the Knights of Labor's *Journal of United Labor*, Little's novella, according to literary scholar Ann Schofield, "had a phenomenal impact on its readers," greatly increasing the *Journal*'s subscription and having, according to the *Journal*, "lined up thousands in the order" (Schofield viii). Little's novella removes the inherent hierarchical structure of benevolence, positing its end goal not as individual uplift or empowerment, but as understanding of class issues, leading to the enactment of broader institutional reform.

Despite *Sealskin*'s success, lengthy fiction that imaginatively dealt with labor issues was not a common feature of labor journals. Literary scholar Mary C. Grimes explains that "Most small newspapers pirated stories and articles from other papers" and "most papers ran escape-type fiction" (Grimes 6). And while for a while there were many "story papers and dime novels" that thematically linked themselves to labor, Grimes speculates that for at least one labor press, the Haymarket bombing of 1886 may have "made the subject of labor too touchy" (14), that such types of fiction "had seemed quick to hop on the bandwagon of labor, and they were equally quick to alight" (14). Between 1888 and 1900 there was a further shift away from working-class literature, as "Even as the popular press stopped printing stories about working-class heroes, [and] more prestigious publications were publishing more about social injustice" (Grimes 15).

*Our Sealskin and Shoddy* envisions its own way of correcting these conditions by building on the benevolence trope employed in sentimental fiction, using the moral power of the novella's main protagonist to route benevolence through institutional reform, rather than personal, benevolent actions. The novella focuses on Mami Symington, an upper-class white woman and heiress to the Symington Clothing Manufacturing Company of Cincinnati, Ohio. While her father (the Company's main-shareholder) is out of the country on business, he has left charge of affairs to Herbert Standish, Superintendent of the Company and Mami's would-be suitor. After seeing what she perceives as unfair and unconscionable behavior towards one of the mill's employees, Lizzie Knowlton, at the hands of Standish, Mami determines to learn more about the lives of Cincinnati's working-class, as well as the relationship between labor and capital in the city. As the plot unfolds, Mami, under the tutelage of Lizzie, learns the seamstress's trade, organizes a union and leads a strike against the city's mills, fights with Standish and other members of Cincinnati society, and eventually persuades the Company board (over which she gains a substantial influence) to reform their current capitalist model, which increases profits at the cost of their employee's well-being, and, at times, their very lives. Mami is successful at enacting reform and in uplifting the working-class not because of her wealth's influence, but because of her insertion of an ethical standard into the institutions which work to oppress the city's workers, institutions to which she herself belongs. By eventually persuading the board of the Symington Company to adapt a profit-sharing business model, Mami validates a social role for herself while simultaneously removing her class influence.

On the surface, the novella seems quite similar to other fiction dealing with the industrial system, such as *The Silent Partner*. What distinguishes *Sealskin*, however, is that Mami routinely lays aside her class status and privileges in order to bring her reforms to fruition. Indeed, she

adopts two different disguises throughout the text, Mary Stillson and Betty Broadbird. As both Mary and Betty, Mami performs the same labor as the other sewing-girls of the city, experiencing first-hand the economic discrimination and oppression of women in the sewing industry. In addition, as Mary she provides charitable, friendly relations to fallen women of the city, and as Betty she helps organize and lead the Sewing Girls' Protective Association, persuading them to strike against the city's sewing companies. Through each of these personas, Schofield argues, Mami is able to show how feminine virtues "are not reserved exclusively for women of a leisured, privileged class. Transformed and declassed into Mary Stillson and Betty Broadbird, Mami retains those qualities and we are reminded that 'she was ever tidy and tastefully attired, even as Betty Broadbird, a poor sewing girl.' Poor, in other words, but respectable, for womanly attributes transcend class" (Schofield x). Mami's feminine attributes are that she is "pure, noble hearted and . . . motivated by Christian principles" (x), and these qualities are routinely shown through her personal care of and investment in the downtrodden women she encounters during her experiences as a worker.

What is unusual about Mami's expressions of benevolence, however, is that she herself is often the one who most benefits from such acts. Mary Stillson nurses back to health Lizzy Knowlton (the sewing-girl Mami first encounters near-death at the Symington Company), but in return Mary learns how to sew from Lizzie, how to procure employment and wages in the city. Mary's wages, however, are not for her, but for Betty, who takes the work from company to company, trying and failing to receive fair compensation for her work at each one. Betty eventually gains regular employment at the Symington Clothing Company, putting out of work a different girl whom Betty then goes to visit and, by using Mary's influence, saves from death, though only temporarily, as she soon commits suicide, greatly distressing Mami.

This successive identity swapping provides Mami with first-hand experience and education about three distinct classes associated with the Symington Company, education she could not otherwise receive as Mami. Certainly, concealing one's identity in such a way is not a particularly new literary trope, but within the context of industrial capitalism, Little employs the trope to demonstrate that the most effective means of class or individual empowerment are not through benevolent aid, but rather through first learning of the problem and then advocating for institutional reform. Such a message was "True to the Knight's belief in education, [that] knowledge of industrial conditions leads to reform" (Schofield viii), and can be seen in other Knights of Labor fiction such as *Larry Locke*, *Man of Iron* (1883-1884) and *Breaking the Chains* (1887). Within *Sealskin*, Mami as Mami frequently engages in discussion with intellectual friends who similarly sympathize with the problems of labor. Eventually, Mami uses everything she learns as all three personas to propose a profit-sharing model for the Symington Company, that once adopted unifies labor and capital and works to the mutual benefit of every member involved, capitalist and laborer alike.

*Sealskin's* resolution, the profit-sharing model, is Mami's ultimate triumph, and justifies a social role for herself while simultaneously uplifting and empowering members of the oppressed classes, whom Little refers to as "Slaves of Competition and Combination" (Little 24). While in effect Mami's institutional reform ends the wage slavery she sees in the city (and which the Knights of Labor similarly saw in contemporary society), such reform begins with reconciliation between old and new, Northern and Southern capitalist systems. Lizzie Knowlton, the worker who Mami thinks is treated unfairly by Standish and who starts her down the path of taking an interest in working-class problems, is the descendant of "one of the wealthiest planters in the State of Kentucky" (3) who had died from a lingering illness sustained while fighting for

the Confederate army. Descended from a renowned planter and likely slaveholder, Lizzie's mistreatment by the Cincinnati textile company could read as poetic justice, that the family who had gained its wealth by selling slave-grown cotton to clothing manufacturers is now destitute and mistreated by those very same manufacturers. Mami, however, recognizes that she herself occupies a similar position, that she too has led a life of wealth and privilege made possible through the oppression of workers. Rather than trying to counteract this guilt by benevolently aiding Lizzie, she chooses to materially educate herself on the problems of the working-class. Whereas Amy Lang argues that Davis and Phelps "were pressed" but ultimately failed "to acknowledge their complicity, as members of the possessing class, in the system of oppression they described" (Lang 71), Mami faces such complicity head on.

Part of Mami's confrontation with her complicity in labor oppression is confrontation with the corrupting influence of labor upon the personal health and ethical standards of the town's workers. After Betty begins employment at the Symington Company as a tailoress, her coworkers tell her the story of the woman whose place Betty had taken, Becky Francher, who had been fired on account of being "too sick to do good work and to give [Betty] a place" (Little 60). Saddened and upset by what she feels is her inadvertent role in Becky's lay-off and depraved condition, Mami rushes over to Becky's home after work to find her and her mother on the edge of death. Though she had encountered illness before, through Lizzie, the figure of Becky's mother shows to Mami the full extent to which industrial capitalism can harm the body, seeing

an old woman. Poor almost to the entire absence of flesh. The eyes were sunken . . . [looked] like deep, dark holes in the face. Lips there were none, for they were wasted away until but a bloodless layer of skin remained, which but illy covered a partial set of semi-decayed teeth. The cheek bones stood out harshly, and the nose looked twice its real size from contrast with an absolutely fleshless face. . . . The joints of fingers, wrists and elbows stood out like great knots, the muscles which



once worked them having entirely disappeared. The skin was worn through at the point of the elbow, and the bare bone absolutely protruded. (62-63)

The mother's body is beyond the point of redemption, so Betty instead directs her attention to Becky, who is also near death. Shortly after her recovery, Becky commits suicide, after admitting to Betty that she and her mother had "agreed to die together" (69).

Capital has a corrupting influence upon the town's working classes, the "slaves of competition and combination." To stem such corruption, the traditional trope of benevolence will not work, as evidenced through Becky's suicide. Thus, Mami leverages her benevolent aid to enact broader institutional reform. She uses her aid to Lizzie to educate herself on the problems of the working-class, and after Becky's suicide, she spearheads the formation of the Sewing Girls' Protective Association. Though Mami does not encounter the direct presence of slavery, she finds its legacy in each of her interactions, and it is only by recognizing her role in continuing the oppressive institution, the new slavery she sees in the town, that she is able to enact reform. In order to truly help those who are traditionally the objects of the benevolent gaze, broader institutional reform needs to be enacted, reform that will raise not just the socioeconomic conditions of one person, but the standards upon which the labor-capital relationship is based. Socioeconomic progress, as Little presents it, will come about only through recognizing and educating oneself on the various ways that class relations operate upon and influence each other.

### ***Free Market Benevolence***

One of the major shortcomings of the labor movement of the Reconstruction era was that it failed to recognize or admit that free labor ideology and idealism did not apply or spread evenly throughout the recently restored Union. Within the South, although Reconstruction

policies and institutions like the Freedmen's Bureau certainly helped the transition from a slave to a wage economy, it was at a pace much slower than Northern labor leaders were comfortable with. In one way, the Freedmen's Bureau seems an ideological precursor to the type of labor panacea Little imagines in the conclusion to *Sealskin*, an institution whose very purpose was to uplift and provide for former slave workers during their transition to freedom. Northern labor leaders like William Sylvis, however, had a different view of the Freedmen's Bureau. During his trip through the South in 1869, Sylvis called for "smashing the Bureau" (Sylvis 334), and referred to recently emancipated slaves being assisted by the Bureau as "lazy loafers" (334). For Sylvis and other free labor ideologues, the Freedmen's Bureau represented an unfair burden placed upon white workingmen.

Sylvis's comments — which read at least as insensitive, if not casually racist — are evidence of a real problem felt by leaders of the labor movement, of how to discuss the relationship between black workers and labor without invoking racial politics, without aligning the social values of the North with the perceived social values of the South. Sylvis viewed the Freedmen's Bureau as first and foremost an economic institution, one that white workers paid into but received none of the benefits from. In this regard, Sylvis was not critiquing the Freedmen's Bureau for the economic aid it gave to Southern blacks, but resented what he viewed as an institution that disproportionately benefitted only one group of wage laborers in the country.

Seen through the free labor ideology that Northerners like Sylvis imagined to have spread to the South after the Confederacy's defeat, the Freedmen's Bureau is an unnecessary system of institutional benevolence, whose very existence and mission affronts the economic reality of the hard-working wage-earners that Sylvis believed himself to represent. It is worth pointing out that

such a viewpoint was not unique to Sylvis; Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison argued about support for the Freedmen's Bureau along similar lines. What is so threatening about the Freedmen's Bureau, according to Sylvis, is that it creates a system of dependency that discourages the advancement of other free laborers, or of the working class as a whole. It is along these lines that labor leaders like Sylvis could simultaneously decry the institution of slavery and the oppression blacks faced under it while also arguing that the Freedmen's Bureau is unnecessary.

Sylvis's critiques of the Freedmen's Bureau are evidence of a larger cultural problem faced throughout the postbellum era, not only between labor and capital but over how to instill and operate in a successful and fair free labor economy. In the South, the free labor ideology of the North was off to a rocky start, and many Northerners were hesitant to say it was because of slavery's continued influence. Systems of economic dependency, like the Freedmen's Bureau, were perceived to threaten and undermine the entire free labor ideology the North had touted and tried to transplant into the South, threatening the welfare and sustenance of millions of white laborers in the process.

All of these factors affected and informed not just the labor movement's views on race, but their ways of dealing with and talking about racial issues. Their critiques are not race-based, labor leaders repeatedly emphasized, but workplace-based. To give voice to these critiques, literary representations of labor and the workplace began to focus on other bodily distinctions between people, ones not grounded in skin color, yet supposedly tied to both moral character and the ability to be economically productive, to be integrated into the wage labor workforce. It was thus that images of disability began to recur in labor fiction.

For Davis, Phelps, and Little, benevolence is a potential way of crossing these class boundaries and enacting reform, though each of these authors exposes how such reform is only successful if it confronts the reasons such relations have developed. As these texts show, slavery continues to exert its influence over labor relations in the North, but in ways that characters often believe they can resolve by either ignoring or containing within certain bodies anxieties that can then be removed from the community and workforce. What these texts demonstrate is an anxiety shared by labor leaders like Sylvie over wealthy individuals and institutions thinking they could understand, let alone resolve, the issues of labor and capital through benevolent acts. During the antebellum era, benevolence could consistently work towards a definable goal: the abolition of slavery. In the postbellum era, however, it was not possible to further abolish an institution that was already ended, but which the working class nevertheless felt the lingering effects of every day.

## **CODA**

### **MORAL DETERMINISM: THE UNETHICAL JUNGLE**

I have sought in this dissertation to chart the rise and fall of a Northern idealism about market relations, what they were, could, and should be. While many of the texts I have looked at take up issues of labor in one way or another, by the end of the nineteenth century, the focus on these issues had shifted.

William Dean Howells, one of the most respected writers of the late nineteenth century, demonstrates this shift in his own writing, when after the early 1890s the themes of his economic novels and other “radical” ideas became “confined . . . to editorial columns and private letters” (Grimes 10). Howells, Mary C. Grimes explains, felt that organized labor “should achieve equity and power by the ballot and by legislation” (Grimes 10). Many workers agreed as well, and the Progressive Era saw increased political participation on the part of workers. The Socialist party, for example, quickly became, after its establishment in 1901, one of the “most vocal campaigners for social and economic reform,” and “enjoyed more than a decade of extraordinary growth” (Dickstein 50, 51).

Within literature, broadly speaking, Grimes describes how near the turn of the century “Most authors agreed on the abuses of capital, the problems of labor and monopoly, and the unequal distribution of wealth; as for how to correct these conditions, however, there was disagreement and puzzlement” (Grimes 14-15). Some novelists, like Edward Bellamy, considered utopian solutions. Naturalists like Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser exposed the relative inability of workers to quantifiably improve their lots in life. Still other authors, such as Jacob Riis, shifted the thematic question of literature from “What to do with labor?” to “What to do with the poor?”

I would like to briefly turn then to what remains the most famous and influential labor novel from the period, Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1905), a novel that was imagined, as

Michael Folsom reminds us, to be the “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of Wage Slavery” (Folsom 47).

Dedicated “To the Workingmen of America,” Sinclair’s novel was an immediate success, instrumental in exposing the unsanitary laboring conditions, political corruption, and gruesome details of Chicago’s meatpacking industry. Literary scholar Morris Dickstein sums up Sinclair’s intentions well: “He aimed not merely to commiserate with them [the working-class] or to describe the conditions in which they worked but to call into question the basis of the system: the ethic of competitive individualism, which turned the urban landscape into a savage place, a jungle” (Dickstein 52). In order to survive in that system, individual ethics need to be controlled and removed.

In this modern, capitalist economy, Sinclair shows the ways that any pretense towards ethical relationships, to both fellow workers and to the market, no longer matter. Instead, people become classified and valued only according to the kind of worker they are, employed or unemployed, rich or poor, or, as Jurgis puts it, a person who would be noticed by the bosses or who had already “been ground up in other mills” (Sinclair 131). As scholars like Dickstein note, the economic descent of the workers in many ways mirrors the paths of the cattle, who “are penned up and slaughtered every day in the stockyards, who are moved along on conveyor belts by machinery that cares nothing for their individual desires” (Dickstein 56). Thus, the relationship between ethics and capitalism in the North, which was pushed to the forefront in thinking of the Northern market after the Panic of 1837, had finally been pronounced, during the heyday of industrialization and monopolist control, as two ideals inherently at odds with each other.

To demonstrate the loss of ethical concern within industrial capitalism, Sinclair presents bodily differences within the workplace not as the results of racist practices, but rather as an

inevitable cost associated with wage labor in the free market system. These other distinctions increasingly took the shape of physical characteristics that, although not determined by skin color, nonetheless worked to actively segregate the workforce.

As Jurgis slowly learns throughout the novel, there is no room in this laboring world for any of the moral or ethical characteristics that labor reformers touted as being the primary consideration for one's economic productivity. Indeed, whenever Jurgis or his extended family is faced with any kind of hardship, Jurgis continually asserts that "I will work harder!" the personal mantra the postbellum labor movement insisted was both evidence of and insurance for one's economic productivity. Simply working harder, however, becomes increasingly more difficult for Jurgis to do because of the physical changes to his body: a broken foot, diminishment in physical stature, and the smell he takes on from his work in the fertilizer plant. Vowing to work harder does not change the judgments the employers of Packingtown make upon the physical conditions of prospective workers.

Instead, workers become valued solely on the basis of their physical characteristics, which themselves begin to form their own, unique kind of ethnic classification within the town. In a somewhat encyclopedic entry, Sinclair describes all the various male manual laborers in Packingtown and how each one of them is noticeable by the disabilities they incur from their labor. Among these persons, their labor is routinely displayed through their bodies:

There were men in the pickle-rooms . . . all the joints in his fingers might be eaten by the acid, one by one. Of the butchers and floors-men, the beef-boners and trimmers. . . their knuckles were swollen so that their fingers spread out like a fan. . . . There were those who worked in the chilling-rooms, and whose special disease was rheumatism . . . . There were the wool-pluckers . . . the acid had eaten their fingers off. . . . Some worked at the stamping-machines . . . [and would] have a part of his hand chopped off. There were the 'hoisters,' . . . [and] in a few years they would be walking like chimpanzees. Worst of any, however, were the fertilizer-men, and those who served in the cooking-rooms. These people could



not be shown to the visitor,—for the odor of a fertilizer-man would scare any ordinary visitor at a hundred yards. (Sinclair 104-105)

All of the people in Packingtown (men, women, and children; wealthy and poor alike), are readily identifiable by their bodily characteristics, ones that capital works to create and maintain to more efficiently operate, putting each worker in his or her specified place, replicating the machine-like qualities of the assembly line. Within this world of labor, ethical relationships cannot change the physical distinctions that work to segregate the workforce.

Indeed, ethics just get in the way. The point is illustrated more clearly through the change within Jurgis with regards to his sense of masculinity and his feelings toward adultery. Though his family has long been on a slow descent into poverty and decrepitude, Jurgis asserts his last semblance of moral standards to attack Ona's boss, who Jurgis learns has been for several months repeatedly raping and coercing his wife. Ona pleads with Jurgis not to make her disclose the crime, as she knows that Jurgis will seek vengeance and that that will "ruin us." "And now you will kill him," Ona knowingly tells Jurgis, "you—you will kill him— and we shall die" (Sinclair 157). After Jurgis's imprisonment for the crime, Ona, her unborn child, and several other members of Jurgis's family do indeed die, which Jurgis continues to blame himself and his vengeful actions for.

To illustrate not only Jurgis's remorse, but his realization of the different ethical standards one must live by just to survive within the wage labor market, we see Jurgis meet with Marija, his cousin, towards the end of the novel. Marija, working in a brothel, through her earnings is able to provide enough for the remaining family members. Providing in this way, Marija tells Jurgis, is not only necessary, but would have dramatically changed the lives of the family when they first came to the city: "We didn't stand any chance. If I'd known what I know now we'd have won out" (Sinclair 301). "You'd have come here?" Jurgis asks in response.

‘Yes’ she answered; ‘but that’s not what I meant. I meant you—how differently you would have behaved—about Ona.’

Jurgis was silent; he had never thought of that aspect of it.

‘When people are starving,’ the other continued, ‘and they have anything with a price, they ought to sell it, I say. I guess you realize it now when it’s too late. Ona could have taken care of us all, in the beginning.’ Marija spoke without emotion, as one who had come to regard things from the business point of view.

‘I—yes, I guess so,’ Jurgis answered hesitatingly. (301)

As Marija points out, moral standards do not procure, they impede economic success. The removal of slavery from American capitalism, though it liberated countless people from bondage, nevertheless forced new classifications of labor into the market. The motto of the free labor ideology that had dominated the nineteenth century, that moral character and individual self-determination were the main determinant of one’s economic success, actually worked to pave the way to systematic oppression of workers. All aspects and semblance of moral character within *The Jungle*, such as care for family members and other loved ones, care for one’s neighbors, care for the poor and the elderly, all are shown to be more of a hindrance to economic productivity than a benefit. Exhibiting benevolence, or acting in an ethical manner, actively operates to further oppress the worker.

*The Jungle* feels like it is on the cusp of something. In some ways, it was, playing no small role in passing the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906. Yet the socialist revolution that Sinclair ends the novel on, and believed was on the horizon, never in fact materialized. Within the novel, critics often denounce Jurgis’s conversion to socialism as forced, rushed, and unconvincing. What disgusts us about *The Jungle* over one hundred years later is not the filth, squalor, unsanitary and unsafe conditions surrounding both the labor and food of the meatpacking industry, but that *The Jungle* exposes the totalizing control and power of industrial capital in ways that still haunt the present day. Sinclair shows how the last vestiges of ethical relationships within the marketplace were gradually removed as important considerations within

industrial capitalism, with no clear path to recovery. In that sense, there is little to distinguish the industrial capitalism of turn-of-the-century Chicago with American capitalism of today.

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## **APPENDIX**

Appendix 1 – Illustrations



Fig 1.1. The Northampton Association's silk mill.



THE OLD HOUSE AT FRUITLANDS, HARVARD, MASSACHUSETTS  
In front are the mulberry trees planted by the philosophers for the propagation of silkworms

Fig. 1.2. Frontispiece to *Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands*, by Clara Endicott Sears.



Fig. 2.1 –David Hunter Strother. Illustration. *Swallow Barn*. By John Pendleton Kennedy.





*Title page of the Lowell Offering, December, 1845. Merrimack Valley Textile Museum.*

Fig. 2.2 – Title page of the Lowell Offering, December, 1845.



Fig. 2.3 – Boarding-House Regulations of the Middlesex Company, ca. 1850.



Fig. 2.4 – Henry Lewis. "A Cotton Plantation."  
1854.



# STATISTICS OF LOWELL MANUFACTURES FOR 1859.

Number of Factories.....52	Number of Spindles.....399,064	Yards made per week, carpeting.....25,000
Capital Stock.....\$13,900,000	Number of Looms.....12,234	Rugs made per week.....50
Females employed.....8,962	Yards made per week, cotton.....2,594,000	Population in 1855.....45,000
Males employed.....4,367	Yards made per week, woolen.....41,000	

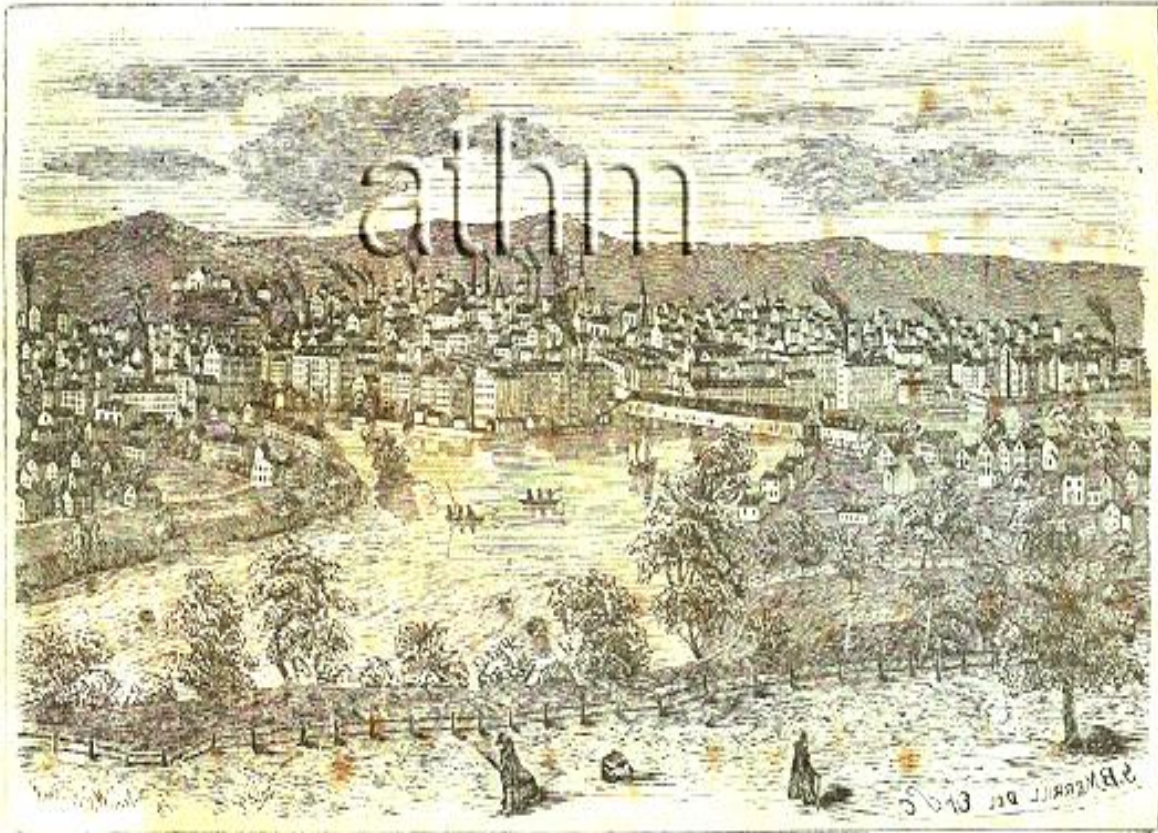


Fig. 2.5 –T? B. Merrill. *Statistics of Lowell Manufacturers for 1859.*





Fig. 2.6 – *Proof Vignette of Southern Planter and Scenes from the South*. ca. 1860.



Fig. 2.7 –Benjamin F. Smith Jr. *Wakefield Manufacturing Company. Hosiery. Germantown, Philada. County. ca. 1850.*





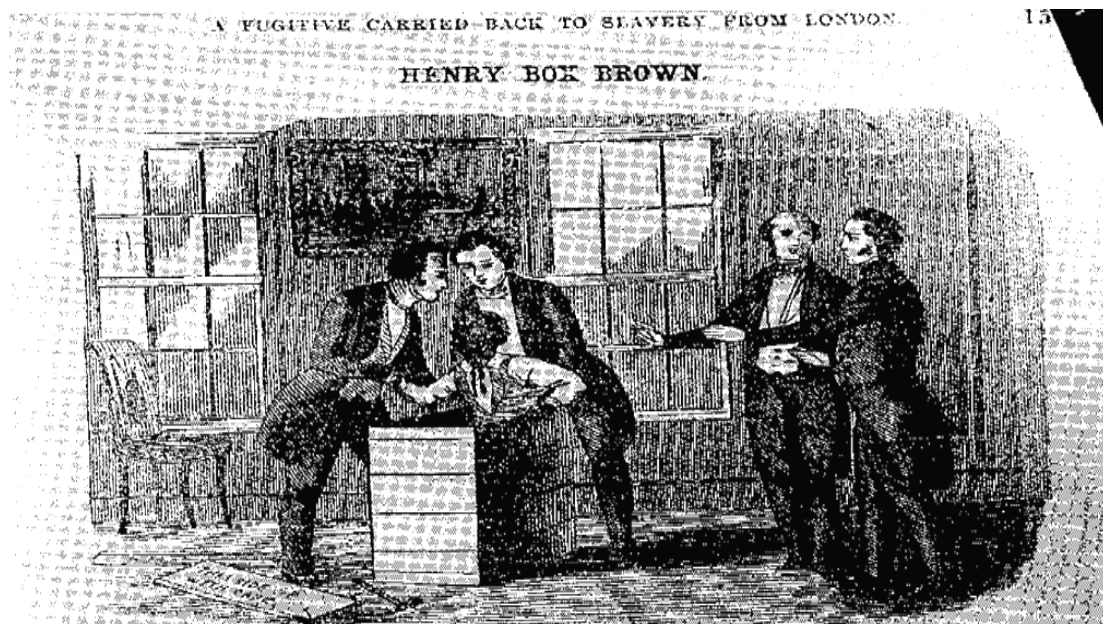
Fig. 2.8 – *View of the Boott Cotton Mill at Lowell, Mass. 1852.*



Fig. 2.9 –O. Pelton. *Merrimack Mills and Boarding-Houses*. 1848.



Fig. 3.1 - "The Resurrection of Henry Box Brown at Philadelphia."



The following remarkable incident exhibits the cruelty of the slave system, while it shows the ingenuity and desperate determination of its victims to escape from it:—

A few months ago, a slave in a Southern city managed to open a correspondence with a gentleman in a Northern city, with a view to effect his escape from bondage. Having arranged the preliminaries, he paid somebody \$40 to box him up, and mark him, "This side up, with care," and take him to the Express office, consigned to his friend at the North. On the passage, being on board of a steamboat, he was accidentally turned head downward, and almost died with the rush of blood to the head. At the next change of transportation, however, he was turned right side up again; and after twenty-six hours' confinement, arrived safely at his destination. On receiving the box, the gentleman had doubts whether he should find a corpse or a living man. He tapped lightly on the box, with the question, "All right?" and was delighted to hear the response, "All right, sir." The poor fellow was immediately liberated from his place of burial.\*

An engraving from *The Liberty Almanac*. William Still is not pictured.

Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

Fig. 3.2 – "Henry Box Brown"





**Engraving of the Box in which HENRY BOX  
BROWN escaped from slavery in Rich-  
mond, Va.**

**S O N G,**

*Sung by Mr. Brown on being removed from the box.*

I waited patiently for the Lord :—  
And he, in kindness to me, heard my calling—  
And he hath put a new song into my mouth—  
Even thanksgiving—even thanksgiving—  
Unto our God !

Blessed—blessed is the man  
That has set his hope, his hope in the Lord !  
O Lord ! my God ! great, great is the wondrous work  
Which thou hast done !

If I should declare them—and speak of them—  
They would be more than I am able to express.  
I have not kept back thy love, and kindness, and truth,  
From the great congregation !

Withdraw not thou thy mercies from me,  
Let thy love, and kindness, and thy truth, alway preserve me—  
Let all those that seek thee be joyful and glad !  
Be joyful and glad !

And let such as love thy salvation—  
Say always—say always—  
The Lord be praised !  
The Lord be praised !

*Laing's Steam Press, 1 1-3 Water Street, Boston.*

Fig. 3.3 – “Engraving of the Box in Which Henry Box Brown Escaped from Slavery in Richmond, Va.”

Appendix 2 – Lydia Maria Child, “The Spider, Caterpillar, and Silk-Worm.”

“What sort of a weaver is your neighbour, the Silk-Worm?” said a Spider to a Caterpillar. “She is the slowest, dullest creature imaginable,” replied the Caterpillar; “I can weave a web sixty times as quick as she can. But then she has got her name up in the world, while I am constantly the victim of envy and hatred. My productions are destroyed, sometimes rudely and boldly, sometimes with insidious cunning; but her labours are praised all the world over---mankind wreath them with flowers, embroider them with gold, and load them with jewels.” “I sympathize with you deeply,” said the Spider; for I too am the victim of envy and injustice. Look at my web extended across the window-pane? Did the Silk-Worm ever do anything to equal its delicate transparency? Yet in all probability to-morrow’s sun will see it swept away by the unfeeling housemaid. Alas, my sister! genius and merit are always pursued by envy.”

“Foolish creatures,” exclaimed a gentleman, who overheard their complaints. “You, Mrs. Caterpillar, who boast of your *rapid* performances, let me ask you, what is their value? Do they not contain the eggs that will hereafter develope themselves, and destroy blossom and fruit?---even as the hasty and selfish writer winds into his pages principles wherewithal to poison the young heart’s purity and peace?

“As for you, Mrs. Spider, you are hardly worthy of a rebuke. Your transparent web is broken by a dew-drop, as some pretty poetry is marred by the weight of a single idea. Like other framers of flimsy snares, you will catch a few silly little flies, and soon be swept away---the ephemera of an hour. But rail not at productions, which ye cannot understand! How can such as you estimate the labours of the Silk-Worm? Like genius expiring in the intensity of its own fires, she clothes the world in the beauty she dies in creating.



**The Silk-Worm**

There is no form upon our earth  
That bears the mighty Maker's seal,  
But has some charm:---to draw this forth,  
We must have hearts to feel.  
I saw a fair young girl---her face [5]

Was sweet as dream of cherished friend---  
Just at the age when childhood's grace  
And maiden softness blend.

A *silk-worm* in her hand she *laid* ,  
Nor fear, nor yet disgust was stirred; [10]  
But gaily with her charge she played,  
As 't were a nestling bird.

She raised it to her dimpled cheek,  
And let it rest and revel there---  
O, why for outward beauty seek--- [15]  
Love makes its favorites fair.

That worm---I should have shrunk, in truth,  
To feel the reptile o'er me move;  
But, loved by innocence and youth,  
I deemed it worthy love. [20]

Would we, I thought, the soul imbue,  
In early life, with sympathies,  
For every harmless thing, and view  
Such creatures formed to please:

And when with *usefulness* combined, [25]  
Give them our love and gentle care---  
O, we might have a world as kind  
As God has made it fair!

There is no form upon our earth,  
Bearing the mighty Maker's seal, [30]  
But has some charm:---to call this forth  
We need but hearts to feel. (Hale 191-192)

## VITA

John Stromski was born in Berwyn, Illinois, and spent most of his adolescence in Lemont, Illinois. He attended Eastern Illinois University, with career plans of teaching High School English. After completing a short teaching practicum in his Junior year, however, he began to question if teaching High School was really right for him. After a summer spent in the English countryside in a study abroad program led by Christopher Hanlon and Francine McGregor, John began to seriously contemplate graduate school. He completed his M.A. in English at Eastern Illinois University, under the mentorship of Christopher Hanlon. He then accepted a graduate fellowship for the Ph.D. program in English at the University of Tennessee. John graduated with his Ph.D. in August 2016, after completing his dissertation directed by Dawn Coleman. He hopes to continue teaching and working at the university level.